



FIT TO BE

Tied

KATE
WILLOUGHBY

Fit To Be Tied
by Kate Willoughby

Atlantic Bridge

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Blurb

Ten years ago, Sadie thought Max was a scrawny, hopeless nerd. She even said so to his face in front of the student body.

Today, Max is still a little nerdy but in a "My, Clark Kent, what broad shoulders you have!" way. And when she ends up as his temporary house guest, she discovers a lot more about the new him. He's amusingly fastidious, independently wealthy, and most importantly, able to make her wet with little more than a commanding stare.

There's just one thing she still needs to find out: what the heck is behind that black door—his bedroom door—the one he asked her not to open?

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Chapter One

When Sadie Corbett saw the man leading the museum's insect demonstration, she realized immediately that the universe was giving her a chance to balance the cosmic scales. The hairs on the back of her neck were never wrong, and every one of them had snapped to attention when she recognized Maxwell Brody.

"As you can see," he said, a giant, brightly colored grasshopper crawling on his hand, "the *Melanoplus differentialis* has enormous hind legs. This enables it to jump up to twenty times the length of its own body."

As Sadie drew near, she noticed Max had changed quite a bit in the ten years since high school. His old eyeglasses were history. His shoulders were broader, his body more muscular. Gone, too, were the Spiderman tees and unkempt hair. Today he wore a polo shirt and chinos with his brown hair cropped short, and although a crowded key chain still hung from his belt loop, he had pretty much transformed from gawky geek to yummy intellectual.

His light brown eyes widened as he noticed her. She cocked a hip and flashed a smile even though she was grubby. Dirt smudged her knees and her blonde hair lay matted on her forehead from the straw hat she'd been wearing outside, but that couldn't be helped.

"It's me," she mouthed. "Sadie Corbett! Remember?"

He blinked at her with an inscrutable expression on his face, but she knew he'd recognized her.

As he put the grasshopper away in a plastic container, she wiggled her way up through the other people until she was right next to him, so close that she could see the dark stubble on his cheeks. That was when she noticed he was a lot taller, too. Her head only barely reached his shoulder. He must have had a late growth spurt after she'd moved away.

"Now," he said, giving her a sidelong glance, "let's look at *Gromphadorhina portentosa*, the giant hissing cockroach."

"Oh, God," said one mom with a sick look on her face.

Sadie watched wide-eyed as Max brought out a beetle the size of a small pancake.

"Where I come from you step on dose tings," a man remarked, and to Sadie's delight the insect hissed, as if in answer. Everyone laughed.

Max allowed a few of the kids to hold and pet the cockroach, then amid protests, he put it away, the demo obviously over. As people asked some final parting questions, Sadie decided she sort of missed his eyeglasses. They'd made him look sexy. Even so, he still had that professorial appeal. Although Sadie loved men in general, she'd always been a little partial to guys who looked studious and controlled in public, but whom she suspected were tigers in bed when unleashed. That had certainly been the case with Max when they'd shared that one hot time in the back of his car. What he'd lacked in experience, he'd made up for with enthusiasm.

She looked at his mouth and remembered what it had felt like clamped onto her nipple, licking any skin that had been showing, devouring her as if she was his one and only chance for sexual fulfillment. Sadie smiled wistfully. Too bad she'd

acted like a bitch. When she fell in briefly with that one group of girls, she'd been so full of herself, wielding her feminine wiles like knives. The four of them had routinely leveled boys with razor-sharp put-downs. She wasn't proud of her behavior back then and recognized that meeting Max again now was an opportunity for her to atone, even if it was just an apology for her cruel words.

"I should have known you'd end up working with insects," Sadie remarked after the last hangers-on wandered away. She crouched to get a better look inside the various containers on his cart. "I remember that elaborate bug report you gave in biology, and your nose was always in some sort of comic book. You do remember me, don't you?" she asked, giving him one of her most impish smiles.

"Sadie," he said, meeting her gaze squarely, "I could never forget you." His eyes seemed to bore right into her bones. Yowsa.

She squared her shoulders. Time to pay the piper. "The more important question is, can you forgive me?"

Max blinked at her.

Great.

Well, she'd made her bed and if groveling was required, she'd damn well do it.

"I want to apologize for the way I treated you in high school. I was a queen bitch to you and I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to rip me a new one, even now after all these years."

"Oh." He shrugged. "I have to admit, I really hated you for a long time."

She nodded. "Hey, I hated me, too, actually."

His mouth twitched, like a smile was checking out the property but wasn't sure yet if it wanted to move in. "I got over it. No hard feelings."

"You mean it? You're not just saying that?"

"I never say anything I don't mean." He delivered this line so earnestly. This man had developed confidence since she'd last seen him. She wondered, self-consciously, whether he was noticing any changes in *her*.

"How have you been?" he asked. "What have you been up to?"

"I've been living the life of a nomad, traveling from state to state doing whatever job comes my way." As the daughter of a career Navy man, she came by her wanderlust honestly. "Right now I'm here in L.A. to work on the big butterfly thing again."

Max nodded. "The Butterfly Extravaganza. I've heard about it. I started working here just after last year's exhibit closed. What are you doing for it?"

"My friend Becky supervises the garden design and I'm helping her. It's my second time doing it."

Max toed the wheel lock on the rolling cart and said, "So, you're involved with the gardens. That explains the dirt."

"Oh, but you know me," she said. "I'm always willing to get down and dirty."

Max raised an eyebrow at her, Spock-like. She almost expected him to state blandly, "Most illogical." Instead, his eyes roved over her, slowly, like a caress.

"I remember," he said, and those two words sent a shiver of lust through her that was part memory and part wishful thinking.

"So," she said, following him into the back hallway. "How much do you know about tarantulas?"

"Quite a bit. My thesis was on the quantitative and qualitative variation of spider venoms. And I collect them, too."

"Venoms or spiders?"

"Tarantulas."

"Like stamps?"

"No, like pets," he said, putting the demonstration insects away on the shelves. "What's your interest in tarantulas? Did you find one in your house or something?"

"No. Actually, I bought one. It's for my next job. I'm going to be a bug wrangler."

"A what?"

"A bug wrangler. I'm supposed to supervise a tarantula crawling on someone's head for a movie."

"How in the world did you get a job like that?"

She closed the drawer she'd been looking in. "As usual, the job found me. A couple of weeks ago I ran into someone I worked with once and I mentioned I was doing this butterfly thing. She assumed I was more involved with the insects than with the gardening and asked if I knew anything about tarantulas." Sadie leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "So, I said I did, just for the hell of it. The job didn't sound too difficult. It's one scene. Their normal bug guy had a scheduling conflict."

Sadie frowned. "The trouble is, I bought a tarantula at the pet store but he's sick. He won't eat any of the crickets I gave him. In fact, the crickets seem to be nibbling on *him*. I'm probably going to wake up tomorrow and find him flat on his back."

"Hmm. That's not outside the realm of possibility. That's the normal molting position, which is probably all that's wrong with him. I'd have to look at him to make sure."

"Oh, Max, could you? Can you look at him after work? I'm staying at my friend Becky's house and she doesn't live very far from here. Please? It could be a matter of life and death! I'd owe you big time."

Max gave her an odd look. His dark eyes narrowed slightly, but he nodded. "Okay. I'll stop by later tonight."

"Oh, thanks, Max! You're the best!"

Sadie grabbed him by the shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. The stubble of his five o'clock shadow was rough against her lips and she smelled an aftershave that had almost worn off. Feeling flirty, she lingered a little longer than the situation warranted, and let her breasts brush against his chest. That brief contact made her nipples tighten, and her clit gave a little twitch. Yeah, he still did it for her. He was so sexy it wasn't funny.

Unfortunately, Max seemed unaffected. But not for long, she decided. Not if she had anything to do about it.

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Chapter Two

Max couldn't believe it. If someone had said, "Hey, Max, a person from your past is going to stroll into the museum today. Guess who it's gonna be?" he would never in a million years have guessed Sadie Corbett. She'd been the bane and boon of his senior year in high school rolled into one petite package. A blonde, flirtatious, and still irresistible package.

Like a wild animal seeking to perpetuate his genes, Max had sensed her the moment she set foot in the children's insect room. That he almost couldn't recall the name of that grasshopper during the demonstration was a sign of her effect on him. In fact, all he *could* recall was that fateful night ten years ago.

Shortly after the football game had started, he'd found her standing by the snack bar without her usual gaggle of girlfriends. Because she was alone, he'd found the courage to strike up a conversation. They'd somehow ended up with a tray of nachos and some beer in his car, where they'd talked until halftime. By the third quarter she was slightly tipsy and to Max's amazement, she started kissing him. He could still remember the musty smell of the car upholstery, the distant cheers of the football-watching crowd, the way her windbreaker crackled as he pushed it off her shoulders, and the fruity scent of her arousal when he eased her panties down. Even now his nostrils flared and his cock pulsed thickly in his pants at the heady memories.

For a glorious, unbelievable twenty-three minutes they not only fogged the windows of his car, they'd almost melted the chassis. "Almost" being the operative word. A roving security guard had discovered them just as he was fumbling with the condom, killing the possibility of going any farther that night.

On Monday at school, she did a one-eighty. Any ego boost he might have gotten from Friday night was pulverized when she had laughingly called him "a dork," "scrawny," and "creepy" in front of her friends. Even though he'd half expected it, her derision still cut deeply. He'd lost his temper, swearing to get back at her somehow, like a wronged character in a B-movie.

So, what was he doing on her doorstep, about to diagnose her sick spider?

Max took a deep breath and knocked on the door. He was giving in to one of his compulsions, that's what he was doing. Ever since childhood, if he started a project, by God, he had to see it through. Most of the time, he could complete whatever it was in a reasonable amount of time, thanks to his ability to focus his mind like a laser beam. But sometimes he couldn't, like the time he'd taken on too many classes in college and had to drop two courses after only a month. He had ended up signing up for them again his senior year, knowing if he didn't, like anything unfinished in his life, it would pester him like a mental mosquito bite.

He preferred to think of this quirk as persistence, but sometimes it drove him nuts. This thing with Sadie was like that, but now magnified because she was here in L.A. So, even though he originally offered to help her with her

tarantula to be a nice guy, he knew deep down his real reason was a need to complete what they'd started ten years ago in the back seat of his car.

"Hey, Max!" Sadie exclaimed with a brush of her lips against his cheek.

She ushered him into a miniscule studio apartment. There was barely room to turn around in there.

"Becky, remember Max Brody from high school?"

Becky looked up from the bed where she lay on her stomach and managed a half-hearted smile. "Hey. It's been a while."

"Yeah," Max replied. "Good to see you."

"Becky's upset because her boyfriend Chip is stationed in Iraq and he hasn't instant messaged or emailed her in a while. He's sort of electronically AWOL."

Becky rested her chin on her crossed arms. "Three whole days. No word."

"I'm sure he'll get in touch soon." Max turned to Sadie. "I hate to rush you, but where's the tarantula? I have a project at work I want to finish and I need to get back to the museum."

"Fuzzy's right here." Sadie indicated the small purple-lidded habitat sitting on the kitchen table.

Max examined Fuzzy through the plastic. A couple of crickets skittered around the enclosure.

"He's molting, all right," he said. "See this patch on his abdomen, how it's darker and a bit shiny? That's a sure sign he's getting ready to shed his exoskeleton."

Sadie bit her lip. "Will he be able to crawl on the actor's head on the set? I'm supposed to show up at the studio with him next Monday."

"Depends. He could molt in a couple of days..."

Sadie brightened.

"...or a couple of months."

"Months?" She quailed.

"And then the new exoskeleton needs to harden for at least a week."

"Shit, shit, shit. I am so screwed."

Becky flipped the TV to a sitcom rerun. "I told you I'd lend you the forty bucks to buy another one, even if I think they're the most creepy things on the face of the earth."

Max shook his head. "No, you don't have to do that. I'll let you borrow one of mine."

"Max, really?" Sadie beamed.

"Yeah. Roz is my Mexican Red Knee. She's extremely tame and used to being handled."

"Max, you are a true friend." Sadie put a hand over her heart, which of course led his eyes straight to her breasts. He forced his gaze back up to her face—she was saying something earnest, for Christ's sake.

"...such a bitch, and I really don't deserve it, but I want to take this opportunity to apologize again. I will pay you back somehow for what happened between us way back when and everything you're doing now. I'm serious."

There was a knock at the door.

"Pizza's here," Becky said. With a sigh, she tossed the TV remote aside and went to answer it.

Max's sordid side conjured up several scenarios in which Sadie could pay him back, and all of them required her to be naked, or nearly so, but the image of Sadie tied to his bed like a helpless slave girl vanished when a high pitched shriek pierced the air.

"OHMYGOD!"

More shrieking.

Becky was simultaneously jumping up and down and clinging to a man in fatigues standing in the doorway. She kissed his grinning, unshaven face with the enthusiasm of a lottery winner.

"OhmyGod, ohmyGod!" Becky screamed. "You're here, you're here!"

Max turned to Sadie. "Maybe *I* should get a job as a pizza guy."

Sadie laughed.

"Sadie, Sadie! This is Chip! This is Chip!"

"Does she always say things twice when she's excited?" Max asked with a reserved smile at seeing the couple reunited.

Chip disentangled himself from Becky and held out a hand to Sadie. "Good to meet you, Sadie. Becky's told me a lot about you."

"And vice versa," Sadie replied. She introduced Max and the two men shook hands.

"I'm gonna go get my gear, Beck. Be right back."

Becky nodded, but as soon as he was gone, she turned to Sadie, desperation in her eyes.

"If I give you money, will you stay at a motel tonight?"

Sadie held up a hand. "Don't worry about me. I am out of here as soon as I can pack my stuff."

Ten minutes later, Max and Sadie were exiting Becky's apartment building so the lovebirds could be alone. Max toted Sadie's duffle bag while she carried Fuzzy's cage. When they got to Sadie's beat-up Toyota, she popped the hatchback for him.

"Where are you going to sleep?" he asked as he put her bag in the back and shut it. "Do you have money for a motel?"

She shrugged. Max scowled.

"Tell me you're not thinking about sleeping in your car."

"Okay, I won't."

He stared at her, incredulous.

"Look, it's a warm night. I've done it before."

"Not this time you're not. There's no way I'm letting you sleep in your car. It's not safe."

"I'll be fine."

"Damn right you will, because you're staying with me. Besides, you heard Becky say Chip's home for four days. There's no way in hell you're staying in your car that long. I have a guest room with its own bathroom. You're welcome to stay as long as you need to."

Sadie put the spider's habitat on the roof of her car and turned to face him. "My rule is I'll be a guest for five days, but longer than that and I insist on paying rent."

"I don't want your money."

She looked up at him. "Well, the money issue is still up for debate, but thank you," she said. Then she hugged him. She

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wrapped her little arms around his waist and pulled him close, pressing her cheek against his chest.

Goddamn it. Just like before, the feeling of her soft breasts nailed him right in the groin. He could feel the blood filling his cock with long hard pulses. Did he have no control over his own body? She was only thanking him for putting a roof over her head, not inviting him to dive into bed with her. Sure, he'd do so in a nanosecond, but not unless it was absolutely clear she wasn't exchanging sex for room and board.

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Chapter Three

When Sadie looked at the exterior of Max's two story house, she decided he either had another source of income or was a genius at investing what he made at the museum. He lived in the upscale community of Pacific Palisades, only a few miles from the beach. A curved flagstone walkway led to double doors, complete with gorgeous stained glass panels that spelled out the house numbers. She checked out the front garden with a skilled eye. A professional had obviously designed it. Accent lighting enhanced the natural beauty of the foliage and invited the eye to linger here and there. She decided it looked a little like Disneyland.

Then she got a load of the three-car garage in which Max had just parked. Translucent plastic boxes sat in shoulder-high columns, each neatly labeled with their contents. The cabinets had labels, too, and she suspected if she opened the cupboard doors, she'd find everything inside precisely arranged. Maybe he made side money as one of those professional clutter-busters she'd seen on TV.

"I cannot believe this," she remarked as Max shut the door of his BMW. "It's neater in here than it is in most people's houses."

"I like things organized," he mumbled, straightening a box that was sitting crooked.

The interior of his house was just as tidy. Pretty, too. Hardwood floors, decorative rugs, furniture with clean lines, lots of rich, warm colors, even actual paintings on the wall.

"Did you decorate this yourself?"

Max shook his head as he sorted through his mail. "I'm flattered you think I might have, but no. All I did was let my mom go to town. She's always been into decorating. And now that there are entire cable channels devoted to it..." He shrugged.

"My mom did what she could, but we moved a lot. We had a few things we brought with us that made a place say 'home,' but for the most part, nothing was permanent."

Max remained silent, so she filled the pause.

"Yeah, that's me, all right. Always on the move. That way nothing gets stagnant. I go somewhere new before the old place gets boring."

Max nodded. "I wouldn't know. My mom and dad still live in the house I grew up in, and I plan to stay here in this house for a long, long time."

"With a house this nice, I think that's a good plan."

Max laid his mail in a stack on a side table by the door. "Let's put Fuzzy with some friends. I have an empty cage he can stay in."

Max led her to the den where he kept his collection of spiders. It was not the Frankenstein lab she'd imagined. The walls weren't made of moss covered stone. The lights didn't flicker eerily. There wasn't a single formaldehyde-preserved specimen to be seen. The place was actually cozy. Most of it was an ordinary office—desk, chairs, bookcases—but one whole wall was made of glass and wood enclosures that had obviously been custom made. In each one was a different species of tarantula. The sheer variety of creatures fascinated

her. She was surprised there weren't labels here too, like in the garage.

"This is fantastic, Max. You could charge admission. I'm assuming this didn't come with the house."

"No, I had a guy build it just for me."

"That must have been expensive."

"Yeah, a little." He shrugged and didn't offer any more information on where he got all his money. Maybe he came from a wealthy family. She hadn't known him well enough in high school to know.

As Max transferred Fuzzy to an empty enclosure, Sadie peered at each spider. When she got to one particularly colorful specimen, she smiled. It was bright iridescent blue and it seemed to know she was looking at it. It raised its forelegs, as if in greeting.

"Hi, little guy," she said and touched the glass.

The creature darted forward with alarming speed. Sadie jumped back and screeched. All the tarantulas she'd ever seen on TV or in the movies moved like molasses.

Max put his hands on her shoulders. "It's okay. You're perfectly safe."

"I had no idea they were so ferocious." Still atremble, she stared at the spider's visible fangs and realized how lethal they were.

"That's my cobalt blue," he said, stepping back. "Cobalts are among the most aggressive spiders in the world."

"Is it poisonous?"

"Well, all tarantulas have a certain amount of venom. If she bit you, you'd probably live. Unless you had an allergy."

"I can't believe how fast she was. My heart's still pounding."

"Lucretia's pretty quick on her feet. Now, Roz, on the other hand, is a perfect lady. She's a Mexican red knee. Here, I'll get her out for you." He opened a different enclosure and she could see why this one was called a red knee. The hairs around the leg joints were a rosy color, as opposed to the rest of it which was a dark brown.

Sadie sat in an oversized leather chair, suddenly having second thoughts. Was she really going to handle a spider the size of hydrangea blossom?

Yes. The movie gig was good money for not too much work, and Max had kindly offered Roz to her, a spider who, according to him, had the perfect disposition.

Sadie swallowed her fear and tried to keep her hand from shaking as the thing crawled slowly toward her fingers.

"Oh, geez," she said, goose bumps rising in a wave up her arm. "I can't believe I'm doing this. This is... fascinatingly repulsive."

Max laid a calming hand on her shoulder. "I told you. Roz is very friendly."

Sadie marveled at the strange sensation of those eight legs gently moving along. The spider had tiny claws. Sadie could feel them, but they didn't hurt. Like Lucretia, she also had big fangs, which she imagined *would* hurt.

"You're sure she won't bite me?" Sadie asked as the tarantula succeeded in making it to the crook of her arm.

"No. The most Roz'll do is flick an urticating hair on you."

"A urti-what?" Sadie gave Max a sideways glance, not willing to take her eyes off the spider for more than a split second.

"Urticating hair. It's like a tiny quill. That's how she defends herself. The hair will itch and burn a little while, but other than that, they're harmless. Roz almost never kicks hairs."

Sadie put her left hand up to let Roz climb there instead of going all the way to her shoulder. The spider was actually sort of pretty. The longer Sadie handled the tarantula, the more comfortable she felt. In fact, eventually she admitted to herself there was an arcane grace to the arachnid's movements.

"Okay," she said, "let me put her on your head. That's what I'm supposed to do according to the script. She can grab onto your hair, right?"

"Believe it or not, tarantulas can climb up glass."

"Oh yeah, like Spiderman can," Sadie said as Max traded places with her. Once he was seated, she smiled and said, "Okay, here goes."

Leaning forward, she moved her hand so the spider could crawl off it and onto Max's head. Ever so slowly Roz crept toward him, but eventually she made the transfer and Sadie let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding.

Suddenly, she realized his face was only inches from hers and if she took a little initiative, she could be kissing him. She wondered if he was a better kisser now, because he was pretty darn good in high school. She met his gaze, then glanced at his mouth. Only one way to find out.

Her lips tingled as they drew closer together. Other parts of her tingled, too. Lower down parts. Parts that hadn't been satisfied in what seemed like forever.

With an intense expression on his face, Max tilted his head. So did she.

He didn't close his eyes. Neither did she.

Then he froze. "Shit," he said.

Sadie realized Roz was about to topple off Max's head. The spider hung onto his hair as he reached up, two of her legs windmilling in the air. Max stood there, his hand cradling his pet, his eyes swimming with apology.

"That was a close one," Sadie remarked wryly.

"Yeah. In more ways than one. Let me put her back where she'll be safe."

Sadie wiped her sweaty hands on her pants. Of course, the palms of her hands weren't the only damp part of her body. Their almost-kiss had her pussy throbbing with want. Max got her so excited so fast that she thought it might be a good idea to buy extra panties, and judging from the obvious bulge in his pants, Max's underwear was getting a workout, too.

"You know," she said, thinking to take things upstairs, "I'm pretty dirty from gardening all day, so maybe you could show me the shower."

He put Roz back in her cage. "Let me show you your room, then. It's upstairs."

The guest bedroom was just as nice as the rest of the house. Decorated in sage green with gold, it made Sadie feel as though she was in a hotel.

"Max, this is so luxurious," she said, smoothing a hand over the chenille throw at the foot of the double bed. "I'm never going to want to leave."

"I told you can stay as long as you need to," he stated firmly.

Sadie closed her mouth. She'd been about to promise him money as soon as she got paid from the museum.

"Then I'll have to make up the difference in trade."

Max raised his Spock brow again.

"I was cooking and cleaning for Becky in exchange for the roof over my head. How about we have the same deal? Although from the way your garage looks, I doubt you'll need much cleaning done."

He frowned, as if being tidy was something he was ashamed of. "Hey, I'll appreciate the cooking. I can cook, but I don't really like to."

"Then I'll whip something up for dinner after I take that shower," she said, trailing off in what she hoped was an invitation to join her for some sudsy, naked fun.

Max went to the bed and adjusted a throw pillow so it was centered. "That'll be great, but I actually have to go back to the museum. I have a few hours more left on a project. Leave me a plate of whatever you make and I'll microwave it when I get back."

She followed him into the hall. "When will that be?"

"I'll probably be back around ten. Make yourself at home," he said. "But do me a favor. Don't go in my room."

"Why?" She glanced down the hall at the now very mysterious, glossy black bedroom door. Her horniness suddenly took a back seat to curiosity.

"You know," he said, "I could just tell you it was a mess and I didn't want you to see that, but that would be a lie."

"Yeah, like I would have believed *that*, Mr. Clean."

He scratched his head with his car key. "Well, women usually expect men to be slobs."

"Which you're obviously not."

"No. I like things orderly." He looked toward his bedroom and said, "Look, I'm a private person, that's all. No one really goes in my room except me. That's how I like it."

"Like your own private sanctuary?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I can understand that, I guess," she said. But she didn't have to like it.

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Chapter Four

Picking up his calipers, Max held them up to the dead moth and turned the wheel with his thumb.

"Wingspan, 7.5 centimeters," he muttered to himself.

He *had* to mutter to himself to keep his mind on his work, because every five point three seconds the memory of Sadie's breasts right in front of his face beamed him into a mental Twilight Zone with an erection that wouldn't quit. Had she realized when she'd put Roz on his head that he'd end up staring at her chest? Her breasts had been mere inches away for what seemed like hours, during which he'd imagined how soft they'd be against his lips and how her nipples would tighten as he sucked them into his mouth.

He couldn't even glance at Sadie without wanting her, without feeling the urgency of finishing what they'd started. Those loose shorts she'd been wearing... His hands had itched to slip inside them and his overactive mind had him imagining the softness of her butt cheeks, the heat between, and the slickness he wanted to cause. Even the smell of the dirt clinging to her skin turned him on. God, it was as if a time machine had rocketed him back to his high school days when hormones inundated his body and sex dominated his thoughts, causing boners right and left.

He shifted on his chair to ease the tightness in his crotch and tried to get back to work. The quicker he got these specimens tagged, the sooner he could leave. Just seven more.

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But after cataloging two more moths, he found himself calculating the probability that he and Sadie would end up the sack. Before, when he'd offered to let her borrow Roz, she'd kissed him on the cheek, lingering a little longer than necessary. Her soft breasts had brushed against his chest, putting his body on sex alert. He had shaken it off, giving her the benefit of the doubt, but he was pretty certain she'd been sending him a subtle invitation. If she did want to hook up, it would be—

Someone tapped him on the shoulder and made him break the lead on his mechanical pencil.

"What the—?"

Damned if petite little Sadie wasn't standing there smiling at him. With her twinkling blue eyes and curvy petite figure, she seemed like a cross between one of Santa's elves and a super-model. She now wore a multi-tiered skirt and a strapless top that was nothing more than a wide, crinkly band of elastic. Not that it mattered. She could have been wearing a ratty rayon bathrobe and he'd still want her. His body's reaction to her was as inevitable as the monarch migration.

"Did I scare you? I didn't mean to," she said. "Whatcha doin'?"

"The question is, what are *you* doing? This is a restricted area, employees only."

She tapped the ID badge hanging around her neck. His eyes went again to her breasts.

"Sorry," he said, forcing his eyes away from her chest. "I forgot you worked here."

"The security guard—Al?—let me in." She looked around. Her voice echoed off the beige and white floor. "It sure is deserted back here."

All the other gray metal desks sat vacant. Storage units for the entomological specimens filled most of the cavernous room. One of the ancient fluorescent lights flickered slightly, buzzing like a cicada. Sure, the museum didn't boast state of the art decor and furnishings, but Max loved it anyway. What most people labeled outdated, he saw as lasting and durable.

"This time of night, it's nice and quiet. Usually just security." He tucked his pencil behind his ear. "So, what are you doing here?"

"I didn't think you should wait to eat dinner. You need your strength."

Max noticed she held a paper bag.

"Al showed me where the microwave was in here, so the food's hot. It's chicken fried rice. Made it myself. There's a Coke, too."

Max shook his head. "You are too much, Sadie."

"It's the least I could do. I even brought you dessert." She hopped up on a stool. "M&Ms."

"Hey, I love M&Ms."

"I know." A pixie smile lit up her face.

Max paused in the act of clearing some space on his desk. "How could you know that?"

"I remember." Her cheeks got a little pink. "From that night."

That's right. He remembered now how they'd nibbled on individual packs of the candies. It had been right before

Halloween, and he'd filched a handful of the packets from the bowl meant for the trick-or-treaters. He never could resist M&Ms.

She wandered to one of the storage cupboards and pulled open one of the wide flat drawers. He was torn between eating the rice—he was starving—and watching her in the hopes she'd open one of the lower ones so when she bent over he could ogle her ass. Then he realized he didn't have to choose. He could do both.

"So," she asked, "did you inherit that house? It's mighty nice."

Max didn't answer for a few moments, chewing.

"No," he said, finally. "I invented a temperature and humidity controlled habitat for my tarantulas my freshman year in college, and it turned out to be good for lizards and such, too. I hooked up with the right people and they helped me get it on the market. Before I knew it, it was the standard for people with reptiles of any sort."

"So, by 'standard,'" you mean if I go into the corner pet store and ask the people there for a habitat for a chameleon, they'll probably recommend the one you designed?"

"Yep. Not only that, but they're in Walmart and the big pet store chains, too."

"Wow. I bet you don't even have to work. Am I right? You can probably live off the profit from your invention."

Max glanced aside, embarrassed. "I like working at the museum. It suits me." He closed the plastic food container, but not before wiping the rim. "That was delicious."

"Healthy, too."

As Max cleaned up his dinner mess, he noticed Sadie watching him, staring at him. Her eyes wandered all over his body, but they kept returning to his groin. His cock pulsed in his pants and he tried to ignore it, but she wouldn't quit. In a few more moments, he'd have a full on erection.

"Don't do that," he finally said in desperation.

Sadie looked up. "Do what?"

"Stare at my crotch."

"Why? As crotches go, it's a nice one." She gave him a slight smile. "And from what I can see, it's getting even nicer."

That did it.

"You know what? I've had enough," he said, putting his pencil away and organizing his work. His tolerance had reached critical mass. She'd given off enough signals for him. He still had several bugs to label, and although it bothered him to leave that unfinished, his need for Sadie was more immediate.

Besides, the bugs were dead.

Sadie gathered her purse and keys. "Yeah," she said. "It's late and you can finish this on Monday."

"That's not what I meant."

He stood up slowly and moved close, into her personal space. She didn't back away, but looked up when he put a hand on her waist. "I'm tired of the flirting games." Catching her gaze, he said, "If you have any objections to my kissing you, you'd better get them out now."

Sadie's arms crept up around his neck and she murmured, "No objections whatsoever."

"Good."

Her breath came out in a sigh as their mouths met. Her lips were soft and full and he couldn't get enough. She tangled her hands in his hair and pressed herself against him as he deepened the kiss. Sexual energy vibrated from her body. He soaked it up like the desert does rain.

Pulling his mouth away, he tugged her elastic top down. "God, Max, yes," she gasped, holding onto his shoulders. The sound of his name on her lips sent a wave of lust through him.

Her breasts came free and he wasted no time in capturing one with his mouth. The nipple was cool and sweet between his lips. As he sucked it, splaying his hand across her back to hold her still, she arched up and the peak hardened. He switched to the other breast which seemed to swell in his hand and teased it with his tongue.

The clatter of his pencil cup overturning brought him to his senses. He was at work, for shit's sake. Yes, it was after hours, but Al could wander in at any minute. Surely Max had enough self-control to hold back until they got back to his house.

Reluctantly, he eased away from her. "We can't do this here," he said, pulling her top back up.

Sadie lifted her gaze to his and smiled, catlike. Her eyes were luminous, even in the unflattering fluorescent light. Without breaking eye contact, she started unbuckling his belt.

"Ah...Sadie, didn't you hear me? We could get caught in *flagrante delicto*," he said. "Again."

Seemingly unperturbed, she shrugged, slipped her hand between them and rubbed his erection. Max gritted his teeth at how incredibly good that felt.

"But I think it's kind of exciting, don't you?"

"No." He took a very difficult step back.

She sauntered over to his recently vacated chair and sat down. One corner of her mouth tilted as she said, "But we're destined to do this."

"We are?"

"Of course we are." She rolled the chair over to him and then worked the hydraulic lever until her face was level with his groin. "That's why we hooked up again. It's Fate, and Fate is City Hall on a cosmic scale. It just doesn't pay to fight it."

He gave a strangled gasp as she opened his pants.

"Oh, God," he said under his breath, looking down at her.

"We'll just take the edge off," she promised, reaching in and pulling his erect cock out. "Then we'll take the party back to your place."

Gripped with a need he couldn't deny any longer, Max gave up. Maybe she was right. It was destiny, unavoidable, inevitable. Because, hell, nothing would please him more than to get blown by Sadie right here, right now. But just as she was about to take him into her hot, wet mouth, a door opened somewhere. Max jerked away from her and stuffed himself back into his pants.

"Shit. It's Al. I knew it," he said under his breath.

Sadie let her head fall back onto the chair and laughed.

He had just zipped up when Al came into view. Plastering a benign smile on his face, Max waved at the security guard,

who gave him a two-fingered salute and continued on his rounds. When Max heard the door open and shut again, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"See?" he said. "No destiny. There is no destiny. There's only the most phenomenal bad luck in the history of the world."

"Oh, Max," Sadie said reaching for his pants again. "The third time's a charm. Al just came by so he won't be due back for a while, right? Let me—"

"No," he declared, his jaw clenched. "We're going home where there's no one to interrupt at all. Especially security guards."

Sadie grinned and grabbed her purse. "Sounds good to me."

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Chapter Five

Sadie discovered she didn't have a lot of patience where Max was concerned. Not a second after he closed the door behind her, she was dashing up the stairs, pulling her clothes off as she went.

"Get a move on, mister," she said over her shoulder. "If you're not naked in bed with me in five minutes, I will not be held responsible for my actions."

When she gained the top of the stairs, she looked right and left, unsure which direction to go. The black door both loomed and beckoned. Wearing only her panties now, she started toward it, but Max arrived beside her, her discarded clothes clutched in one hand. With the other hand, he led her resolutely toward the guest room.

"Damn," she muttered.

Still, she rallied. What really mattered was sex with Max. *Now*. Location wasn't all that critical. Once inside her room, she headed straight for the bed to yank the comforter down. Then turning, she stood speechless for a moment.

Was the man striding toward her, naked, hard cock in hand, ready to fuck her brains out? No. He was folding her clothes to place them neatly on the dresser. He then pulled off his own shirt and folded it too.

She wanted to be insulted he wasn't as frantic with lust as she was. The very idea that she hadn't inflamed him past any thought of tidiness begged for a hissy fit. Yet, as soon as she

got an eyeful of his naked chest, any irritation she felt at this needless delay disappeared.

"You are," she said with a restless sigh, "way more buff than I remember, Max."

Max was not a reed-thin boy anymore. He was a man. A full-grown, confident, uber-sexy man. Where once was just skin and bones, he now had muscle, defined and oh so deliciously hard. He came to stand at the foot of the bed, feet apart with his arms at his sides and she explored him with eager hands, dropping hot, licking kisses all over his torso. He smelled like soap and that indefinable male something that said hello to her femininity like a Darwinian wake-up call.

"Deja vu?" she said, fumbling with the snap on his pants in her haste to undress him.

"Yeah, but there's no one to disturb us this time. So slow down."

He grasped her wrists gently, but she shook herself loose of his grasp. "I don't want to. Come on, Max, I can see how hard you are."

His pants fell to the floor with one pull and she didn't waste time getting his boxers down either.

"Oh, yes," she breathed when his cock sprang out, thick and hard.

He obediently stepped out of his crumpled clothes, but this time she anticipated his tidy instinct and kicked his pants and underwear clear across the room. Then, to keep him from going after them, she quickly knelt and wrapped her lips around his cock.

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He sucked in a breath as she took him inside. Sadie slicked up his shaft, gliding back and forth on it. The head was hot against her tongue, his deep, deliberate breaths provocative.

She backed off and wiped her lips. "So, just to reiterate," she said, punctuating her words with licks of her tongue, "there's no roommate we have to worry about?"

Max's nostrils flared. "No."

Curling her fingers around him and squeezing, she asked, "What about a neighbor coming to ask for a cup of sugar?"

His answer came out low, almost a growl. "No."

"And you aren't going to answer the phone? Even if it's the president of Petco wanting to order fifty thousand of your bug houses?"

Max's brows drew together. "What happened to not being responsible for your actions? Stop talking and get back to what you were doing."

Sadie stroked his shaft with her hand. "I'm going to make you come so hard," she said, bending to give his cock a quick suck, "you're going to shout. Like Tarzan."

"I don't shout when I come. I don't get loud at all."

Sadie raised her eyebrows. So, Max was the strong, silent type. Interesting. She wondered if she could coax some sexy sounds out of him. Hearing the grunts and groans from a man while they had sex turned her on.

Sadie licked her lips and took the head into her mouth. The salty drop of moisture at its tip only added to the clean flavor of him. Max didn't moan, but he did hiss and his breathing got quicker, which made Sadie smile, a difficult thing to do with a mouthful of hard cock.

She took hold of his hips and slid her hands around to graze her fingernails over his buttocks. As she sucked on him, she loved how his muscles tensed, and when she took him in deep she inhaled his earthy male scent with appreciation.

Max caressed her head. Their eyes met. He had such a penetrating stare that she couldn't look away.

"Don't stop," he said.

Sadie reveled at the hoarse command in his voice. As she drew him deep into her mouth again, his fingers tangled themselves in her hair. He began thrusting shallowly and she let him take over, urging him on with soft moans of encouragement. Slowly, the speed of his thrusts increased. His cock slid in and out of her mouth with a wet sound that aroused her, and when he clutched her head, she knew he was close. His cock penetrated the tight, wet ring of her mouth over and over while his eyes bored into her with an intensity that immobilized her.

At the last moment, he jerked back. His cock was deep red and shiny. It throbbed visibly and Sadie half-expected him to come on her. She tensed. She had a strong aversion to men coming on her, but luckily he held back. Great gusts of air burst from his lungs as he fought for control.

His jaw clenched tight, Max gestured for her to get on the bed. Sadie scooted until her head hit the pillow then stretched toward the nightstand to get one of the condoms she had put there earlier. So extreme was her desire for him, she felt like she was vibrating, but she didn't bother telling him to hurry, knowing he wouldn't. She bit her lip as he got some matches, lit the candle sconces, three on each of the walls flanking the

bed, and flipped the light switch off. Flickering flames cast shadows everywhere and the exotic scent of cinnamon drifted into to her nostrils. Okay, the candles were a good call, but when he bent to pick up his pants and underwear, she must have made a sound impatience because Max chuckled as he shook out the chinos.

With a wry frown he said, "You know, these are looking a little wrinkled. Maybe I should get my iron."

"Max!" Sadie exclaimed, sitting up. She fully intended to drag him bodily to the bed if he took so much as one step toward the door.

He laughed at what must have been an outraged expression on her face.

"I'm just kidding," he said, joining her on the bed.

"Oh, good one." She gave a half-laugh, half-annoyed sniff. "Next thing you know, they'll be offering you your own late night show."

Max chuckled as he slid his hands up her legs, pushed them apart and knelt in the open space between. Their playfulness waned as, for a long while, he just looked at her. His gaze took a leisurely journey over her body, lingering at her breasts before continuing down. Lust surged through her body as he brushed a thumb across her mound. She held her breath, waiting for him to rub or increase the pressure...*something*. But he didn't. The glint of amusement in his eyes gave her the feeling he was testing her somehow, like they were playing a game of sexual chicken. Well, fuck that. It had been way too long since she'd had a cock inside her, not counting the fellatio just now. Slow and easy would

be fine later, but right now, she really, really, really wanted to get fucked.

He traced a finger along the low waistline of her panties, edging his fingernail along the lacy border. The delicious scratch of it made her shiver.

"Take them off," she said.

He ignored her.

Moving up, he loomed over her, keeping his weight on his elbows, his legs between hers. Without a word, he kissed her, a penetrating, leisurely kiss. Sadie moaned in pleasure as she opened her mouth to his tongue. The head of his inflamed cock seared her stomach and she lifted her hips, wanting him to nestle it between, where her pussy wept moisture for him. Instead, his lips closed on a nipple. She gasped and arched upward as he swirled his tongue around the turgid tip, nipping it sharply. He immediately soothed the bite with a kiss and moved to the other breast. Sadie caught his head with her hands and helped him get there faster.

"Suck hard."

This time he did as he she asked. Sadie would have writhed if his weight hadn't kept her largely immobile. He sucked almost to the point of pain and then let go, covering her breast with his palm and massaging.

She grabbed his head for another kiss, plunging her own tongue into his mouth, and with a heave, she rolled them both over so he was on his back.

Then she exhaled hard as she pulled back to gasp, "I want you *now*."

"I know." His lips curled in a half-smile.

"I'm taking my panties off. Don't try to stop me."

"Wouldn't dream of it." He tucked his hands under his head and the corner of his mouth took more of a turn upward.

"And I'm not going to fold them either," she added.

"Suit yourself." He laughed. "But I reserve the right to fold them later."

"Well, much later," she muttered as she squiggled free from her underwear as quickly as she could. After flinging it on the floor, she ripped open the condom and rolled it on him. "We've waited ten years for this, you know, Max."

"Yes," he replied. "You've been very patient."

"Oh, you are such a laugh riot," she joked, punishing him for his wry remark with a light slap on his penis. He chuckled.

Determined, she straddled him and with one hand angled his cock so the head kissed her entrance. "Ten years is a hell of a lot of foreplay."

"I won't argue with you there."

"But I think, ahhh," she said, easing down and moaning at the sensation of him filling her inch by inch, "it was worth it."

At last he was inside her, a rock solid column of pleasure, stretching, stroking, hot and thick. Hugging herself, she moved up and down. "God, that's so good."

Max had to agree. Sadie's tight wet pussy sheathed him in a grip totally unlike that of her mouth. He gained more physical satisfaction from the varied pressure and suction she could apply with her mouth and tongue, but when he was inside a woman like this, the knowledge he was giving them pleasure in return enriched the sex act tenfold. Only one other thing could have made this better, but he wasn't about

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to attempt that tonight. No. Vanilla was the way to go for now. Anything kinkier would have to wait.

It was such a turn on to watch her ride him, to see the shiny wetness on his shaft when she lifted up and to smell the spicy gust of her scent when she came back down. He swore sometimes he could live on the musk of a woman. He inhaled, savoring the peppery aroma, wanting to taste it, to smear her juices all over his face as he ate at her. But still, he fidgeted, preferring to be on top.

Bracing her hands on either side of his head, Sadie leaned forward so her breasts swayed in front of his face and Max smiled. With both hands, he squeezed those soft globes, almost roughly. When she didn't protest, he gave them a light slap. Her eyes narrowed, but she said nothing more. He teased one rosy tip with his tongue. Once pale pink, his hard sucking earlier deepened its color to a dark rose. He nipped it. She moaned. He bit a little harder and her sharp gasp roused him to action. He'd had enough of being on the bottom.

Crunching his abs, he sat up, one arm around her back, then reversed their positions, twisting their bodies until she was looking up at him with wide eyes, his cock still embedded deep within her. But then she smiled, raising her arms above her head, stretching like a cat, and Max couldn't resist the temptation and gave in to his urge to completely take over.

"Now you've done it," he said, even though it wasn't really her fault.

"Done what?"

He caught her wrists in his hands. "Nothing," he said, pulling out only to plunge back in.

She tried to free her arms at first, perhaps testing him, but he didn't let go, went at her hard, his thrusts short and quick. Each time his hips slapped against her, she made a soft grunting sound.

She struggled halfheartedly. "Max, let me go. I want to touch you."

"Don't you like it?"

"Yes, but—"

He tightened his grip on her wrists. "Then go with it."

He bypassed more talk with a demanding kiss. He knew he was perilously close to crossing the line, but he couldn't help himself. Luckily, she didn't put up any more resistance, not even when he shifted both her wrists to one hand and cupped her chin with the other.

"You're going to come hard," he promised.

"So are you," she managed to gasp. "You're gonna shout, too," she added.

He chuckled, went at her even harder and she met him thrust for thrust. They locked gazes, as if in a silent battle, and he wasn't about to lose. He was determined to wrench an orgasm from her, more than one.

In an extreme act of will, he withdrew, his cock so hot he was surprised it wasn't steaming. Keeping his grip on her wrists, he pushed three fingers into her wet opening and fucked her with them. Sadie arched in pleasure. He kept up a frantic pace until she went still, crying out and coming all around his hand. Her pussy clenched and unclenched and her face flushed in ecstasy.

"Good," he said with approval. "Again."

He let her wrists go so he could spread her legs wider. Giving in to his earlier wish, he now claimed her sex with his mouth. He lapped up her juices, sliding his tongue in and around her plump folds, stroking and dabbing her clit. Sadie's hands tangled themselves in his hair and she did her best to hold his head where she wanted it. It wasn't long before she tensed again and let loose with another breathless, orgasmic cry. This time he felt her climax against his face, pulsing and wet and long.

"God, Max, back inside," she said, obviously insatiable. "Back inside. Quick."

He moved upward swiftly, sheathing himself once more in her tight hole. His breath gusted out of his lungs at the sharp pleasure of that heat and slick friction.

"And pin me again," she gasped. Her voice had gone husky, sending a shiver down his back.

Although he said nothing as he trapped her wrists against the mattress, he loved that she wanted him to restrain her arms again.

Both their bodies were slick with sweat now, their breathing harsh and loud in the otherwise quiet room. Max gritted his teeth as he pounded into her, hips slapping against her. He couldn't hold out much longer, but then, suddenly, she dug her fingernails into his shoulders and shuddered. Damn, she was coming a third time. Feisty little Sadie was the most orgasmic woman he'd ever met. God, what a turn-on it was to be able to satisfy a woman so many times.

But it was his turn now. His cock was on fire. His balls ached. It only took a few more intense, fast strokes, and then

he was there. Wave after wave of intense pleasure assaulted him. He ground himself against her, coming hard.

But, damn. He wished he could jet his come directly into her body. He longed to see it ooze from her as she lay sated in his bed, tied, immobile and submissive. The strength of that urge surprised him. He was usually able to have a satisfying sexual relationship with a woman without letting his dominant side interfere too much, but Sadie was proving to be different. Perhaps because she had treated him so badly he harbored some psychological need to punish her for it. Or maybe it was her yen to submit that she didn't seem to be aware of herself.

After withdrawing from her body and ridding himself of the condom, he rolled over and gathered a limp and satisfied Sadie into his arms. She snuggled against him, her cheek on his chest, with a soft sigh.

"That was superb," she murmured sleepily.

Max made an assenting noise, absently stroking her shoulder with his thumb. He resolved to look for an opportunity to bring up the subject of bondage. He'd just put out a feeler or two to test the waters. He'd done it often enough in the past. Sadie would be no different.

Except, he admitted to himself, he'd never feared a negative reaction from a woman like he feared it from Sadie. How curious.

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Chapter Six

Early the next morning, Sadie woke when Max's lips brushed against hers. She smiled, remembering instantly the erotic exercise she'd engaged in with him the night before. It had been a long time since she'd had such fantastic sex. She was eager to repeat the experience.

Without opening her eyes, she said, "Last night was out of this world, so here's my plan for today. Sex first. Breakfast after. More sex in the shower." She paused to massage her breasts, already feeling aroused. "Then lunch. Maybe. Sex, definitely. And well, you get the idea."

He didn't say anything and he didn't take her into his arms and kiss her madly. The smile faded from her face. When he sighed, she finally admitted with disappointment he wasn't in bed with her.

"I can't," he said. "I have to finish cataloguing. Remember?"

She blinked blearily at him. Standing by the bed, he was already dressed. She glanced at the clock and groaned.

"It's only eight," she complained. "On *Saturday*."

"I know." A slight frown creased his forehead. "I just need to finish that project. I can't leave things undone."

"How about a quickie, then? A little morning glory to start your day off right?" She sat up, letting the sheet slither down her body to expose her breasts. His eyes dropped down to take in the sight, and she saw his Adam's apple bob, but he resisted.

"I would really like to, Sadie, but I can't."

And he left for work. He actually left her!

Disgruntled, Sadie decided the man's work ethic needed taking down a peg or two, especially since he didn't need to work at all.

After a shower, Sadie headed for the kitchen to get something to eat and her mood brightened when she saw a pool in his backyard. It had been too dark to notice last night. She almost danced around at the prospect of baking in the sun later. First, she would spend some more time with the tarantula. Business before pleasure. Then she'd dig up some sunscreen somewhere and absorb some wonderful Southern California sunshine.

Grabbing an apple from the kitchen, she went to Max's office where she munched her breakfast and looked again at the wall of spiders. Most of them sat still, showing no indication they were even alive. It got her thinking. If this bizarre collection of bugs was right out in the open, then what did he keep hidden in his bedroom? Right before he left, he again asked her to respect his privacy. Apparently, sleeping with him wasn't enough to get her a ticket into the Forbidden Zone. As she tossed the apple core into the trash, she told herself she was being ridiculous and there was nothing odd in there. But she couldn't quite convince herself of that. She didn't truly think there was anything evil or wrong, but beyond that, she had no idea what he could be keeping secret.

Sadie peered at the Mexican Red Knee, who looked as placid as it had the night before.

"I wish you could tell me what he's hiding, Roz," she said, opening the cage. "But maybe you've never been in there either."

Like yesterday, the spider cooperated and crawled slowly onto her hand with a little urging. When it got to her elbow, she transferred it to her hand, repeating the process over and over.

"Yeah, you're getting a little spider workout today, aren't you?" Sadie said.

Growing a little bored, but knowing she needed to get completely comfortable with the creature, she wandered around the office. The shelves behind the wooden desk held a collection of science and science fiction books. On the desk itself, she found a blotter, the kind that was a monthly calendar.

As she transferred Roz to the desk, Sadie kept one eye on her while she read from seven-thirty to nine-thirty on the evening of the sixteenth Max had a "shibari demo." Sounded like martial arts. Maybe Max was a black belt or something. She grinned, picturing him in a black outfit and sleek dark glasses. She liked watching Matrix-type fighting. He also, she discovered later while snooping around in his garage, had an awful lot of rope. Maybe he had a boat or was into mountain climbing. The more she found out about Max, the more mysterious he became.

When Max came into the backyard around one, Sadie was sunning herself naked next to the pool. She'd spent the afternoon working on her tan and building up some good old

vitamin D. The trees flanking his property shielded her from the neighbors.

"Welcome home, honey," she said, setting down her glass of iced tea.

"I sincerely hope you used sunscreen," he said, shading his eyes.

"SPF forty."

"I don't know. You look a little red to me."

She shrugged. Maybe she was a little pink, but she knew her limits. "I was just going to cool off in the pool anyway. Care to join me?"

"The garage needs sweeping," he said. "Some leaves blew inside when I pulled in."

"Oh my God, Max! Something is seriously wrong with you if when faced with a choice between sweeping leaves and hot sex, you choose leaves."

He chuckled and started unbuttoning his shirt. "There *is* something seriously wrong with me. Actually, quite a few things. But you didn't let me finish. I said the garage *needed* sweeping, not that I was necessarily going to sweep it."

Chuckling to herself, Sadie dove into the pool. The water was refreshingly cool on her heated skin. When she surfaced, Max was folding his pants to lay them neatly on top of the shirt he'd already put on the lounge chair. Pressing her lips together, she suppressed her mirth. One of these days she was going to make him forget about neatness.

Once he'd joined her in the shallow end, he took her into his arms and kissed her. If she'd had doubts about his eagerness, they were swept away as his tongue slid into her

mouth and his already hard cock poked her in the stomach. Reveling in the feeling of his rough embrace, she realized now she'd existed in a continuous state of excitement, awaiting his return. Her body had been without sex for so long, it was making up for lost time, craving a satisfaction Max was more than qualified to provide.

He pulled her closer, one arm around her waist, making a low noise in his throat. His mouth was so demanding, and his kiss made her pant with need. Her skin felt slippery against his, probably from the sunscreen.

"Max, wait," she said, breaking the kiss. "We don't have a condom."

He muttered a curse, eyes intense and dark. "I'll pull out," he said gruffly.

"Really?"

"Yes. Trust me."

He smeared kisses along her neck and across her chest, lifting her out of the water so her breasts were exposed. She wondered if she should run upstairs, grab a raincoat and make him wear it. But then he clamped his lips around a nipple and sucked. Sadie gripped his shoulders, arching back. Pleasure zinged through her with each pull of his mouth.

"Wrap your legs around me," he ordered.

She obeyed, loving the rough command. His hand snaked down and she moaned when his fingers probed her. Her juices seeped out already, making the contact slippery.

Then, suddenly, his cock was there, its broad head nudging at her opening. She shifted her hips and he glided

inside in a long, slow push. Warm pleasure suffused her from within.

"Oh, my God, that feels so good," she breathed.

Max pulled out and thrust himself back in, almost overwhelmed with sensation. It had been years since he'd had sex without a condom. He'd forgotten how luxurious it was to feel a woman's pussy around his dick, sans the latex coat. The velvety texture of her stroked him so exquisitely a groan came up out of his chest.

"You moaned," she said, triumphant.

"I can't help it," he said. "This is incredible."

With one arm locked around her waist, he rocked into her, sending the water sloshing against the tile. She had her head back and her face was slack with passion. He bent forward, taking a nipple into his mouth again. As he sucked, it hardened against his tongue like a small warm stone. He nipped it before turning to the other and giving it the same treatment. Sadie moaned, her hair plastered against her forehead, her eyes closed in pleasure. He gave her a little shake.

"Look at me," he said.

She did. Her eyes had shifted from their usual translucent turquoise to a deep cobalt. He walked forward until her shoulders nudged the edge of the pool.

"Hold on to the side."

While she stretched her arms out and got a grip on the tiled edge, he took a hold of her hips. Their increased buoyancy in the water was something he intended to take advantage of. As he thrust, he lifted her and twisted her this

way and that, jabbing her from different angles, causing friction in unexpected ways. His rhythmic gyrations coaxed low, burning sounds from her, sounds that heated his blood so it felt like liquid fire in his veins.

"God, Max, that's so good. You promise you'll pull out?"

He locked gazes with her. "I promise."

Max took deep measured breaths, trying to absorb how gorgeous she looked. Her breasts shook with the force of his thrusts and her skin gleamed in the afternoon sun. Again and again he plunged into her, sending water surging over the wall to create ripples. Overhead an airplane roared. He heard the beep of a car alarm being turned on.

Finally, she inhaled sharply, arching her back so the water streamed off her stomach and between her breasts. Her body squeezed his cock as if sucking on it to extract its essence. That did it. With a mighty effort, Max pulled free of her slippery hole.

Grasping his cock in his fist, he came with strong spurts into the cool clear water. It was good and would have been better inside her, but he'd promised. As he enjoyed the dwindling pulses of satisfaction, Sadie reclined on the steps.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "That's what I'm talkin' about."

Max sat beside her. "I'm starving now," he said. "Did you have lunch yet?"

"I was waiting for you. I have a muffaletta ready and waiting in the fridge."

"What's a muffaletta?"

"It's a sub sandwich they make in New Orleans."

"God, I love submarine sandwiches." He turned his head toward her, still not managing enough energy to move a major muscle group. "If it's anything like that fried rice you made last night, I can't wait. You sure you didn't buy that?"

She shoved his shoulder in indignation. "I most certainly did not. I made it with stuff I found in your kitchen."

"Where'd you learn to cook all this exotic food? Chinese fried rice. 'Nawlin's' muffaletas..."

"Like I said, I move around a lot. That way I always pick up new skills. See new places. That's the way I like it. I plan to visit all fifty states before I die."

"How many have you seen so far?"

"Fourteen that count. I only count them if I stay there longer than a day."

A little while later, Max's taste buds were in heaven. Sadie really knew how to cook. He could get used to this type of kingly treatment and was about to say so when she asked, "So what's with all the rope?"

He almost choked on his food. "What?"

"Well, I kept my promise to keep out of your bedroom, but you never said anything about the garage."

Max smiled wryly. She'd found the tubs where he kept supplies for his *shibari* classes. Well, it wasn't as if they weren't made of translucent plastic. She didn't even have to open them up to see what was inside.

"You a cowboy in your spare time?" she asked.

He chuckled. "No."

"Then what's it for?"

Deciding the moment of truth had arrived, he said, "Bondage, actually."

She blinked at him, her face suddenly, curiously void of expression. "Bondage, huh?" she said, "Like whips and chains and stuff like that?"

"Not really. I like rope. Plain old rope."

"I see."

For some reason he felt the need to explain further, as if that would erase the slight frown that had appeared on her forehead. "But I'm not talking rope like on clipper ships. The rope I use is much thinner and what I do with it is, well, sort of like art."

She looked skeptical.

"Wait here. I'll show you."

A few moments later he returned with a book.

"Well, I'll be damned," she said. "Is that why I can't go into your bedroom? Is it all—Oh my God. You *wrote* this?"

"Yes." Although immensely proud, he tried not to let it show too much on his face.

"*The Beginner's Guide to Shibari, Weaving Webs of Pleasure.*" She studied the book for quite a while. He found himself anxious to know what she thought. For her to be quiet for so long was unusual. When she finally looked up, she shook her head. "Japanese rope bondage. Wow. This is the most amazing porno coffee table book I've ever seen," she said, smoothing a hand over the cover.

"Thanks, but it's not supposed to be porno. It's supposed to be instructional."

"I'm just teasing you. It's actually really beautiful photography. I saw on your desk calendar that you had a *shibari* demo and I thought it was some type of martial arts."

"Well, actually it did originate as a way to restrain prisoners, but now it's more of a...recreational thing."

"So you *give* the demos. You're the teacher."

"Yes."

"And where do these kinky classes take place? Because I know darn well it's not at the community college."

He chuckled. Her playful mood had returned. "Mostly at the Keep, a BDSM club I belong to."

Max had joined the Keep several years ago after having attended one of their 'munches,' weekly meetings offering information about the BDSM lifestyle. He hadn't known what to expect, being new to the scene. Up until then, he'd settled for vanilla sex, but eventually came to realize something was missing. He wanted more. At that initial social meeting, he saw he wasn't alone after all. Other people craved the control like he did, and even better, there were those who lived to relinquish their control.

His first encounter had been painfully awkward. He had been so green and known almost nothing about negotiation, and he'd acted so uncertainly, his partner stopped the scene after only ten minutes. He'd been so humiliated he hadn't tried again for weeks.

Luckily, when he finally returned, Mistress Mary took him under her wing. She allowed him to watch her work with her submissive. He learned about "safe, sane and consensual," safe words, and aftercare. She taught him what dominance

was, and what it wasn't, and the heavy responsibility that rested on the shoulders of a good top. She showed him a way to channel his need for control in a positive way that pleased both him and his partner, and for that he would be forever grateful.

"So," Sadie said, pulling him out of his thoughts, "how long does it take to tie someone up like this?"

He shrugged. "It depends on the wrap."

She opened the book back up to a place she'd been marking with her finger. The photograph showed the basic *shinju* wrap in which the woman's torso was bound, but her breasts were exposed. "What about this one?" she asked.

He answered nonchalantly, even though her questions had him wondering again, hoping, actually. "Depends. I could do it in as little as three minutes or draw it out to fifteen or twenty."

She didn't say anything for a while, just sat there looking more thoughtful than he'd ever seen her. He had the strong suspicion that if he'd been into naked cliff-diving, she'd have given it a go right off the bat. Her personality was such that she tried new things like other people tried on shoes. But she was hesitating now. That was fine. He was a patient man. He could wait.

Two weeks later, Sadie was still staying with Max. The tarantula wrangling job had been put off a week. Because she hated freeloading, Sadie nagged Max non-stop until he agreed to accept a token amount of money as rent, not nearly enough to qualify as fair to him, but enough to assuage her conscience. The sexual chemistry between them burned like

the sun so they continued to sleep together in her bedroom. But never his. It made her wonder what lurked behind that shiny black door. When she asked him why she couldn't go inside, he merely said, "You're not ready." Whatever the hell that meant.

Eventually she decided that if she couldn't see his bedroom, accompanying him to his kinky club was the next best thing, so she asked if she could accompany him to that shibari demonstration he was holding. His book had piqued her curiosity and she read the whole thing in one night. She told herself it was because she was interested in Max and his dark side and that it had nothing to do with the subject matter, of course. Been there, done that, not interested. No way, no how, not in a million years. But Max was hesitant.

"Please, Max? I've never been to a BDSM club before. It's not restricted or anything, is it?"

"For legal reasons the Keep is a private club, so yes, it's restricted. People can't just walk in off the street."

"But I could go with you as your guest, right?"

Max glanced at her, his unemotional Mr. Spock expression firmly in place.

"Come on, Max. I'm a big girl. You don't have to shelter me. Remember, my dad was in the military. I've been all over the world and seen a lot of shit. Besides, what do you think is gonna happen? I'm not going to make a scene or embarrass you."

"No, that's not what I'm worried about." He tapped his index finger on the counter.

"Then take me with you. Please. It'll be educational. It'll broaden my horizons."

Sadie held her breath as he considered it. At last, he heaved a sigh. "All right. I suppose you can come. On one condition. After the demonstration, you go wait for me in the store."

"Store?"

"Before you enter the club proper, there's a small store where you can buy stuff."

"Kinky stuff?"

"Yes."

"Why do you want me to wait for you in there?"

"Because the club can be a literal freak show sometimes, and after the demo, I have to take care of my assistant. A lot of times during demonstrations like this, the sub goes into a kind of trance and my job is to make sure she comes out of it okay."

She bristled. "What are you afraid is going to happen? That I'll be shocked or disgusted?"

"Yes."

"What if I promise I won't be?"

"You can't promise that. No one can."

Spock could've, she thought.

"Sadie, I'm not budging on this."

"Because I'm 'not ready.'" She make air quotation marks.

"That's right. Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it, but under protest."

He grinned. "Duly noted."

The Keep was located in an industrial center, about an hour from Max's house in the Palisades. Sadie checked out the crowd at the entrance where a line had formed. Some of the people looked normal enough, dressed in street clothes like her and Max. Moving from city to city like she did, her wardrobe wasn't big, but it was versatile. She put on some dark blue jeans and a tight tank and dressed it up with an open, gauzy blouse. Max wore a simple black t-shirt and black jeans. Yum. She did spot one man sporting a leather codpiece, like they wore in Shakespeare's time. A woman in all red had a coiled whip hanging from her belt. But some people, despite the moderate California weather, wore trench coats which made Sadie wonder what was underneath. Some even wore cloaks.

Max bypassed the line and escorted Sadie right up to the front.

"Steve, this is Sadie. She's with me," he said by way of explanation.

As Steve handed Sadie a nametag and waved them through, Sadie heard whispering from people in line. A couple of women even called out to Max, giggling and waving like he was a movie star. That didn't surprise her. Max was a hunk, especially in the all black bad-boy get up he had on.

Inside the building, Sadie half expected to see stone walls with chains, iron maidens and other medieval torture devices. Maybe even a booth that served up spankings instead of kisses, like something out of a kinky carnival. But it wasn't like that at all.

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As Max led her toward another door at the back, she glanced around. The first room was a store front, as Max had said. Books, sex toys, and various other kinky accoutrements were for sale. Beyond that was a large open room where about fifty people had gathered. To one side, a snack table held munchies and non-alcoholic drinks. Scattered about were crazy pieces of—for lack of a better term—furniture, whose function Sadie could only begin to imagine. Hanging on the opposite wall, some sort of circular structure actually did look like a medieval torture device. At the far end of the room was a stage area where Max would obviously be conducting his demonstration. Rows of folding chairs sat in front, most of which were filled already. Two people were busy setting up more chairs.

A pretty redhead hurried over and greeted Max with a hug and kiss on the cheek. She wore an orange button-front blouse, under which she obviously wore no bra, and a pair of yoga pants that showed off her toned behind. Her long, straight hair swished like it had been prepped for a shampoo commercial.

"Max, honey," she exclaimed. "Did Adam tell you? Tilly couldn't make it tonight, so I'm going to be your assistant." Sadie saw a line appear between Max's eyebrows as the woman caressed his arm, pressing her breast against him. "I'm so excited I can hardly stand it."

If Sadie had been a cat, she would have hissed. While her relationship with Max wasn't clearly established, she didn't like this woman pawing him. Miss Perfect Hair could get her

mitts on him after Sadie left town, but until then, he was unavailable.

Max disentangled his arm and made introductions. "Brooke, this is Sadie, a friend of mine from high school."

"Friends from high school. Isn't that nice," Brooke said with a polite smile. "Max, we'd better get up there. It's almost time."

"You go on ahead. I'll be there in a minute," he said.

As Brooke took off toward the stage, Sadie scoffed. "Assistant, huh? Here's what I think. I think Brooke would like to assist you right out of your pants."

Max scoffed. "Like that's gonna happen."

After settling Sadie in a seat he'd called ahead to reserve, he joined Brooke who was perched on a high stool with a swiveling seat. The audience quieted as a man with a microphone got on stage.

"Good evening, everyone. I'm Master Adam." Some applause broke out and Master Adam smiled. "You're in for a treat tonight because our own Max Brody is here to do one of his famous *shibari* demonstrations. He first became interested in Japanese rope bondage five years ago when he came upon a book in our store. After training for a year in Japan, he wrote his own book, *The Beginner's Guide to Shibari, Weaving Webs of Pleasure*. He regularly travels across the country to conduct demonstrations and tonight he's going to show us the traditional shinju, or breast wrap. So please join me in giving a warm welcome to Max Brody."

After clipping the mike to his shirt, Max spoke about the history of shibari. His obvious enthusiasm for the subject

drew the audience in, herself included. When she'd jumped to the conclusion earlier that *shibari* was a form of martial arts, she hadn't been that far off. It originated with the intricate bindings that the samurai used to subdue their prisoners and sometimes torture them.

By the time the actual demonstration began, Sadie was entranced, but her enthusiasm went up in a puff of smoke when Brooke unbuttoned her blouse and with a shimmy of her shoulders, shrugged it off.

Sadie almost jumped to her feet in protest. The woman even had aggressive nipples, hard before he even laid a hand on her. Even so, Sadie had to admit Brooke was gorgeous. Sadie's boobs weren't anything to sneeze at, but they weren't nearly as luscious and round as Brooke's. Helen of Troy probably had boobs like Brooke's, the kind of breasts that made men weep or do incredibly stupid things just so they could touch them.

Like Max was going to.

This is a simple demonstration, Sadie reminded herself. *Like a professor showing his students how to dissect a frog.*

"Now," Max said, "you start with a bight at the center of a six fathom rope, like so..."

After positioning the rope under Brooke's breasts, Max spun her around on the stool so her back was to the audience. As he tied the first knots around her ribcage, he emphasized the need to keep alert for signs of distress in the sub, but Sadie had a hard time paying attention to his words because Brooke was putting on quite a show of her own.

Clearly she was getting off on this and Sadie didn't like it one bit.

A few minutes later, Max paused to test the rope tension. "At this point, we're about halfway through. Usually, because of the vascular constriction, the woman's breasts will become very sensitive very quickly. This is a good time to check the comfort level of your bottom. You can tighten later with cinches if you have to. Are you good, Brooke?"

Brooke's breathy response had Sadie grinding her teeth. "I feel fantastic, Max." She drew out the word 'fantastic' like it was a piece of Godiva chocolate in her mouth.

Ignoring her ridiculous behavior, Max finished up. The fluid motions he used reminded her of tai chi, each movement flowed into the next, like a dance. His voice mesmerized the audience, and the end effect was beautiful and titillating. Now, his ropes stretched over Brooke's rib cage and shoulders, lifting and thrusting her impressive rack out into the atmosphere. She had a dazed, slightly dreamy look on her face.

"Okay, Brooke," he said, "let's demonstrate how sensitive your breasts have gotten."

"Fine with me," she purred.

Max took a feather from the table and as he trailed the soft tendrils across her breasts, he talked about the constriction of the blood vessels and such. Brooke sighed with pleasure, her breathing coming a little faster. A man in the audience chuckled. Max flipped the feather around and drew the pointed end over her skin. Brooke moaned.

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As Max nodded and turned back to the table, Sadie shifted in her seat, uncomfortable. She grew even more fidgety when Max showed the audience the item he'd exchanged for the feather. It reminded her of the clamps on jumper cables, but much smaller and connected by a fine silver chain. Unbelievably, as he attached a clamp to one of Brooke's nipples, Sadie felt a disturbing twinge of arousal between her legs. Brooke bit her lip and arched her back. The second clamp swung back and forth as Max crossed behind her.

"Oh God, I..." Brooke stared at the dangling clip. As Max took it and pinched it open, he tugged a little to get it to reach. Brooke gasped. "Max, I think I'm going to—"

And as he attached it to her other nipple, she gave a little cry and came. The woman had an orgasm right on the stage in front of fifty people. Someone in the audience hooted and applause broke out.

Sadie didn't join in.

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Chapter Seven

After the demonstration, Max left Brooke as quickly as he could, but she'd been needy. He couldn't be sure her abject pleas for reassurance were genuine, but couldn't take the chance and assume she was play acting. Finally, after twenty minutes of soothing reassurance, he escaped.

Although Sadie kept her promise and was waiting for him in the store, two doms stood with her—Enrique and Michael. An unexpected swell of possessiveness rose inside him. He should have known these two would find her, even here in the store. As Max strode up to them, Enrique placed his hand on Sadie's shoulder and brushed her throat with his thumb. Michael leaned close to murmur something in her ear.

Shouldering his way through, Max put a possessive arm around Sadie.

"Ah, Sadie's off limits," he said, trying not to growl.

Although she regarded him with a cool look, he didn't remove his arm. No way. Not with these two Casanovas around. With his Antonio Banderas good looks and magnetic intensity, Enrique could usually have a sub literally coming at the snap of his fingers in no time flat. He liked the challenge of a newcomer and got a Neanderthal kick out of adding notches to his belt. Max had watched subs of both sexes succumb to Enrique's spell. Michael was just as popular with his long, straight white blond hair, glacial blue eyes, and square jaw. Both men presented a threat to Max's unofficial

claim on Sadie and damned if he was going to let that threat go unchallenged.

"She belongs to you? She's not wearing a collar," Enrique said. He held Sadie's gaze almost like a cobra and its prey, but Sadie got a hold of herself and batted his hand away.

"Don't," she said. "I don't belong to anyone."

"We're still working out the details," Max insisted.

Enrique looked Sadie, who said nothing more. Then he directed his gaze toward Max. Max lifted his chin, his message clear. If Enrique or Michael wanted Sadie, they'd have to get past him first. Michael nodded and backed off.

Enrique, too, inclined his head in deference, like some baroque lord of the manor, but he couldn't help leaving Sadie with a parting comment. "If you change your mind, love..."

Max waited until they were gone before saying to Sadie, "We're out of here." But Sadie didn't budge.

"We need to talk," she said. "What was all that about? Barging into our conversation, acting all Me Tarzan, She Jane..." She glared at him, clearly irritated.

"I'm sorry."

"You should be sorry because I have news for you. I waited for you because you asked me to, because I respect you, not because I belong to you. The last time I checked, I was a free agent."

"You're right. You are."

"Then what was all that? What details are we working out? My voluntary sexual servitude?"

Max sighed. "No. Not at all." He glanced at the person manning the store, who was politely pretending not to pay attention. "Let's get into the car and I'll explain."

As they walked across the parking lot, Max mentally berated himself. He should have known better than to bring her tonight. If it had been any other woman, he would have introduced her to the lifestyle with a munch, where the club expected and catered to newbies. But for some reason, with Sadie, logic flew out the window. He'd wanted so much for her to see him in his element, admired and sought after. He thought she'd be safe in the store, but he'd been wrong.

"Here's the deal," he said, once they'd settled inside his car. "You *are* a free agent. I absolutely respect your right to choose who you want to spend time with, but I want to be honest with you. It upset me to see those guys coming on to you, especially when Enrique touched you."

"Michael blew in my ear." When Max's nostrils flared, she said, "You're jealous."

"Yes."

A little of the fight went out of her at that. She heaved a sigh. "Well, as long as we're being honest, I really hated seeing you with Brooke. I mean, come on. 'Ooh, Max. I feel fantastic, Max. Touch my tits and I'll come for you, Max.'"

"That wasn't my fault," he protested. "Sometimes a responsive sub will go under into something like a trance—we call it sub-space—and the endorphins released by the brain can make it real easy for people like Brooke to come."

Sadie slumped back in her seat. "So, where does that leave us?" she asked.

"I'll tell you, if you answer a question for me."

"Depends on what it is."

"So," he said, "other than Brooke, what did you think?"

She thought a moment. "It was a lot to process. I thought I knew what to expect, but obviously one trip to a gay bar and a few triple-X videos don't mean squat. I have never seen so much rubber, leather, and latex in my life. But I thought you were fantastic. It was easy to see how much you love shibari."

"But it's not for you...?"

Again, she paused briefly before saying in a flip tone, "Well, if I decide to try it, you'll be the first person I call."

"Come on, Sadie. Really."

A frown wrinkled her forehead. "I don't know, Max. I—I just don't know." She looked up at him, a pleading look on her face.

He leaned over and kissed her. "Okay."

When they got home, Max wasn't sure what to expect. So far, they'd spent every night together since she moved in, but it had been an eventful evening and who knew what was going on in that wacky head of hers?

At the top of the stairs, they both stopped. She faced him and then sighed. "I really hate the idea that the last woman you made come tonight was not me."

He pulled her close and she pressed her face into his chest.

"Then let's go to my room. I'll make you come, Sadie. I'll make you come hard."

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Max had spoken without thinking, but now that she'd been to the Keep and knew he was into shibari, he realized there was no reason she couldn't see his bedroom. In fact, the more he thought about it, the better he liked the idea. He suddenly felt a strong urge to fuck Sadie in *his* bed, his big-ass, custom-made, monster of a bed. Seeing her with Enrique and Michael had stirred something up inside him that didn't want to settle down—an "I saw her first" feeling, and nothing was going to appease it except animalistic sex with her, pure and simple, down and dirty.

"Are you serious?" she asked. "Are you actually letting me into your room?"

Before he could answer, she was already most of the way to his door. Her doleful mood vanished as, after a quick glance over her shoulder and a pixie smile on her face, she pushed the lever on the black lacquered door and pushed.

Following at a more sedate pace, Max tried to see his room through her eyes. A couple of years ago, he'd had a contractor knock down the wall between the master and another bedroom to make a large open play area. One piece of equipment he enjoyed was a sturdy wooden scaffold with metal hooks from which he could suspend a play partner. She walked over to that, looked at him and shook her head slowly.

"Max, I know what this is for because I read your book, but really. This looks like King Kong's banana rack."

He chuckled. "Don't knock it 'till you've tried it."

Next to the scaffold was a distant cousin to the type of rope grids they had at city parks. Kids played pirate on them.

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Max sometimes played pirate on his too, but his was made of wide leather straps, and the angle was adjustable.

Sadie gave him a look. "This thing is a possibility. But not tonight."

"Fair enough."

He watched her gaze slide over to his bed. Heat suffused his groin as she approached the highly unusual piece of furniture.

"*This* is simply magnificent," she said.

On first glance, the ornately carved front panel, side panels, and curtain made it seem like a stage, and in a way it was. At times, the scripted events that occurred there resembled sexual theatre, but it was actually a slightly altered copy of a medieval Chinese marriage bed he'd commissioned. One of the alterations he'd requested was that the side and ceiling panels be removable and stored under the bed where special grooves allowed Max to slide them in. Exacting craftsmanship ensured there was no annoying rattle during sex.

"I've never seen anything like this before in my life. Are we going to do it in there?" She pointed at the shadowy interior.

"If you want." Max flicked a switch and an intimate light banished the shadows and accentuated beautiful inlaid Chinese designs on the panels.

"Oooh. I want, all right," she said. "I definitely want."

So, Max took his time. He'd acted like a total ass and she deserved every bit of effort he could give. He did his best to take her tenderly and carefully because he wanted her to feel safe in his bed. He did nothing aggressive. He let her call all

the shots. When she nudged his head toward her breasts, he nuzzled them obediently, paying great attention to her tight nipples. He flicked them with his tongue, sucked and nipped them until she writhed beneath him.

When she told him to lie back, that she was going to suck his cock, he complied eagerly. She took him into her mouth and worked him until he was gasping. Still, he did nothing she didn't initiate. And she'd caught on to what he was doing, too.

"Do you want me to come?"

She pulled her mouth off him. "No."

So he didn't. It about killed him, but he didn't.

She got on her knees, facing the headboard. Her lush ass beckoned him as she placed her hands above her head. "Fuck me now, Max."

Frustrated but determined, Max moved behind her. "How do you want it?" he asked, his mouth by her ear. "Hard and fast or slow and easy?" He rubbed the head of his cock against that wet slit.

"Slow first. Real slow."

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he eased himself between her swollen lips. The tight, wet heat was exquisite. Gently, soothingly he stroked her belly as he worked himself inside her. She moved to accommodate him with long, breathy sighs and soft sounds of pleasure. Each shallow thrust brought him deeper until he was seated all the way inside and his groin was pressed against her ass.

He fucked her slowly, just like she wanted. Their bodies rocked together, giving and receiving pleasure in the dark recesses of his Chinese bed. He caressed her breasts, her

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hips, her thighs, her throat as he thrust. He loved touching her smooth skin, but still thought about how rough the rope would be, cinched around her torso, and how it would create beautifully symmetrical lines that he longed to trace with his fingers. When he tied her, the ropes would be an extension of him. If she accepted his ropes, she would be accepting him.

But the thought of binding Sadie, excited him too much. He backed off those images. He'd promised to make her come hard tonight, and damned if he was going to break that promise. After they'd left the Keep, he'd vowed not to let his emotions get the best of him again. He needed Sadie's trust.

So, as his cock entered and withdrew again and again, stroking and filling her, he concentrated on maintaining control until she climaxed. Then, and only then would he come. He didn't know when she'd become his main priority, he only knew that she was.

When the day of the spider job finally arrived, Sadie's wrangling skills were well up to the task. Max had lectured her at length about tarantula behavior. She left around six in the morning and didn't anticipate being home until after dinner.

At the museum, Max found it impossible to concentrate. His thoughts kept veering toward Sadie, mainly because she kept texting him. Eight o'clock: *The asst. director is nice.* Nine-fourteen: *Schmoozing with the extras.* Eleven-fifty: *God, I'm sooooo bored.* Then nothing for a long time. Disgruntled, he ate his cafeteria turkey sandwich, noticing how bland it was compared to the food Sadie cooked for him. It made him

wonder what was for dinner. He'd seen something marinating in the fridge that looked interesting.

At two, his cell rang. It wasn't Sadie.

"I'm looking for Max Brody. My name is Brock O'Dell and I run a private club out here in Honolulu. Adam from the Keep gave me your number. I hope that's all right."

"Sure. Adam's a good friend. What can I do for you?"

"We're in a bit of a bind. There's an annual convention out here called KinkCon."

"I've heard of it."

KinkCon started out as an island convention, but because of its exotic locale, people from the mainland U.S. and the Orient began making it a vacation of it, combining pleasure with, well, pleasure.

"One of our presenters had to cancel and we're desperate to find a replacement. Adam said you might be able to help us out."

"When's the convention?" Max noticed some of the paper clips in his drawer were facing opposite directions and fixed that. "Isn't it coming up?"

"It starts on the twenty-first."

"That's only a month away."

"I know, brother. Believe me, I know. Bob was scheduled to do a four-day workshop and speak on a couple of panels, so if possible, I could use you for the entire five days. I've seen your book—excellent work, by the way."

"Thank you."

"We can arrange a book-signing for you. Adam said he'd ship us all the stock your club has on hand and if you agree,

I'll move heaven and earth to get a hold of as many copies as possible. We'll comp your conference fee, of course, but that's all we can do financially."

Max would love to be able to give Sadie a week in Hawaii. He knew it was a state she hadn't visited yet. She'd shown him a map of the U.S. in her overstuffed datebook. Each state she'd gone to had a big X on it.

"I think I can swing that," Max said, "but I have to check my schedule. I should be able to let you know for sure by noon tomorrow."

When he got home, Sadie was pulling up, too. She ran and jumped into his arms by way of greeting.

"I take it this means you aced it," he said.

Her sauciest grin in place, she leaned back and said, "In one take. We did it in one take. It was great. And you were right about printing up those business cards last night. They really came in handy. I gave them out to everybody and guess what! Scott Kincaid, one of the stars, asked me if I could teach his son Piers how to handle a tarantula. Kid wants a red-knee for his birthday and Scott figured it would be good if he learned the basics from a professional."

"Sadie, that's great."

"He wants an estimate from me for the whole kit and caboodle—a spider, a habitat, and the lessons."

As she cooked dinner, they talked about it and settled on a lucrative price. Max promised to find her a tame tarantula, suitable for a teenager, and a deluxe model of his habitat, gratis.

"I have a dozen in the garage gathering dust. You're welcome to choose one."

"You've got to be kidding me. Dust is probably afraid to go into your garage."

His mouth twitched in amusement. "Even so."

"Well, I accept with gratitude. You are the best."

After that, she was bursting with so much news about her day, he just sat back and listened. For the next half hour, she chattered on and on about her every moment on the set. She listed everything they had to choose from for lunch, describing even the kinds of tables and chairs they'd set up. Her sense of humor and excitement colored her entire narrative and he couldn't help but be caught up by every word. He would never have thought that hearing about the goings on of TV celebrities would interest him, but it appeared that, if it interested Sadie, it interested him.

Very curious.

"I have news of my own," he said as they sat down to eat. Sadie had whipped up a salad with poached salmon and served it with crusty peasant bread and some herb butter he watched her make in under five minutes.

"Oh? Did the museum get a big shipment of bugs today?"

He chuckled. "No."

He told her about O'Dell's phone call.

"Hawaii is on my list!" she exclaimed, practically bouncing in her seat. "I'm there, Max! I'm so totally there. After today I even have money to—"

"Forget that. If you go, the trip's on me."

She stopped bouncing. "What do you mean, if?"

Right after O'Dell's call, Max had been all for taking her along, but now he wondered. He had so many concerns. Generally at conventions like KinkCon, the hotels demanded a certain level of decorum so guests not attending the event were not offended. However, the mixers, workshops, and play parties were a different story. Max remembered being shocked at many of the things he saw at the Keep, and at a large gathering like this where people came from all over, it could be overwhelming. The fetish wear alone might disgust her, and above all he didn't want her to be disgusted.

He probably shouldn't have mentioned KinkCon to her at all, but he couldn't very well announce he was leaving town and not explain why. Keeping the convention a secret would be a violation of trust. If he couldn't trust her, how could he expect her to trust him?

"It's just that this convention is going to be the Keep, times ten, that's all."

"Look, Max, what do I have to do to prove that I can handle anything you can dish out?"

"You don't have to prove anything to me."

"Then what was all that 'You're not ready,' crap? Do you know how condescending that sounded?"

He frowned, surprised. "I'm sorry if I made you feel small. That wasn't my intention."

"What do you want from me then, Max? What am I supposed to be getting ready for? Do you want to tie me up?"

God, yes. He wanted her to place herself physically and mentally in his hands. Of course, she'd done that already, just by having sex with him, but bondage went so much farther.

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Submission was the ultimate gesture of respect and trust, and he craved that from Sadie. That called for caution on his part. So far she seemed receptive to his initial dominant overtures, which was encouraging. He didn't want the experience to be one-sided. He wanted her to enjoy the interplay as much as he did. When he gloried in the contrast between her skin and the coarse ropes, he wanted her to share his elation. He wanted her to feel cherished and admired. He wanted her to descend into sub-space so he could give her so much pleasure she'd need hours to recover. During those hours he would anticipate and see to her every need.

"Of course, I want to tie you up. God, I want that more than anything. I've wanted that ever since...well, probably ever since that night we made out in the car." He smiled sheepishly. "Except now I know what I'm doing."

"Then, let's do it. Let's do it tonight."

"Sadie..."

"Just the chest tying thing, though. Like you did to Brooke. I want to start small."

"You have to be sure. I want you to be sure."

She met his gaze squarely and said the sweetest words he'd ever heard. "Max, I want you to tie me up."

Upstairs, Max went to the armoire where he kept ropes for his personal use. He preferred natural hemp. Extremely strong, it held knots like a dream and left beautiful compression marks afterward, but the white bamboo rope was silky to the touch and shimmered in dim light like mother of pearl. For tonight, he ended up choosing the latter. They

could explore his desires some other time. This time would be for her.

When he came to the bed, he found her sitting on the edge of the mattress, her legs drawn up to her chest.

"Here's what we're going to use," he said. "It's made of bamboo fibers."

Sadie loosened the coil. "It's soft," she said, surprised. The sight of her caressing it with her fingers sent desire up and down his spine. "Am I supposed to get naked?"

Detecting a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes, he said, "It's up to you."

A small frown appeared on her forehead. "Clothed doesn't sound like as much fun."

"It isn't," he said.

"Okay, then. Decision made."

Now whether *he* undressed or not was another question. Remaining clothed increased the disparity between them, gave him more emotional clout. But again, although he suspected she might eventually enjoy that unequal distribution of power, better to start nice and easy.

After he took his clothes off, he turned to a sight he found both amusing and surprisingly touching. Sadie, gorgeously nude, was folding up her clothes and putting them on his dresser. Not too long ago she'd kicked his clothes all over the room, knowing darn well the mess would irk him. Tonight, she was obediently catering to his preferences without even being asked. One thing was for sure, he thought with a smile, he'd never get bored with her around.

"Ready?" he asked her.

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Nodding, she stood next to the bed near his dresser.

"Ready."

"Now I'm trusting you," he said, doubling the rope to find the bight. "I'm trusting you to let me know the minute you feel the slightest bit uncomfortable."

"Okay."

With the utmost care, he wrapped the length around and under her breasts, then threaded the two ends through the loop. As he worked, Sadie remained pliant, but because she seemed tense, he worked extremely slowly.

"You're doing fine," he said, wrapping the coils around and around. "You're doing just fine."

He kept checking the tension, asking her if it was too tight. At one point, she gave a soft gasp and he stopped immediately. The safety scissors were easily accessible, hanging on a hook on one of the bed panels.

"Is something wrong? Is that too tight?"

"I—no, I'm fine, Max. It's just when you cinched the ropes just now and squeezed my breasts together, it felt...kind of...I don't know. Exhilarating."

Max smiled, elated. Leaning down, he whispered in her ear. "Just wait. If this goes the way I think it will, you may never want to have vanilla sex again."

Sadie rewarded him with a shiver.

At last he was finished. He studied his handiwork from the back. The rope came up over her shoulders in a V-shape to meet below and between her shoulder blades where a flat knot connected to the ropes coming over and under her

breasts. As far as he could tell, the tension was perfect. He could slip two fingers beneath the lines without trouble.

"All right, I'm done. Turn around," he said, anxious to see the front.

Slowly, Sadie faced him and holy shit, she looked hot. The woven cords squeezed her breasts so they thrust outward, taut and slightly swollen. Her skin had reddened from the constriction, making the pearl white ropes seem brighter in contrast. And although she looked gorgeous now, he also anticipated those bittersweet moments when he freed her. The subtle ridges and valleys left on a woman's skin had an ethereal beauty that always struck a chord inside him.

"I feel tingly, Max," she said.

"That's perfect. I want you to feel more than tingly."

Stepping close, he took her head in his hands and kissed her. He brushed his lips back and forth across hers, breathing slowly and deeply. She responded by licking him, her tongue darting in and out of the crease of his lips.

He inched her toward the bed. "Lie down," he said, "I want you right in the middle."

Standing at the foot of the bed, he let his eyes rove over her. Her flesh bulged slightly around the rope and excitement glinted in her eyes as he trailed a finger along the bands under her breasts. She hissed in pleasure.

"Are they sensitive?" he asked, kissing her jaw and the side of her neck.

"Yes, yes, incredibly. I can't believe it."

Encouraged, he straddled her and traced all the ropes he could see, over and under her breasts, up her chest to her

neck. She closed her eyes and he could tell she was aroused. Her breathing was quick. When he finally filled his hands with her breasts, Sadie arched, her mouth open as she sucked in a breath.

"Oh, God."

Then, he gently squeezed, and her sobbing moan made his cock ache.

The sensation of Max's fingernail circling her areola was so extreme, Sadie thought she might faint. Mind-numbing pleasure rippled over her skin and the teasing scrapes had her shuddering, writhing and moaning like a porn star. Poised over her body, he covered her breasts with his hands, kneading and squeezing, and then catching the tips with a tight pinch and a quick release.

"Oh, God, Max," she cried, "that's so incredible."

He smiled at her as he let his head descend oh-so-slowly until his lips brushed the tip of one of her swollen breasts. She threaded her hands through his hair as he drew a nipple into his mouth and tongued it. Never had she experienced such intensity from breast play. Every sensation felt magnified, leaving her panting, gripping his head tightly as if she'd never let him go. Her cries of passion grew as well in pitch and volume, and then to her amazement, she came. The pleasure peaked and ebbed quickly but strongly. Her empty pussy contracted and she gasped for breath, wanting his hard cock more desperately than she thought possible.

"Nice," he said, looking down at her with a smile of satisfaction.

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"Nicer when you're inside me," she said, twisting so she could reach the drawer of his bedside table. "Get a condom on because I can't wait any longer."

He smile got wider. "Oh, yes you can," he said, taking the packet she'd fished out of the drawer and palming it.

"Hey, don't make me hurt you, mister," she said. Then she frowned, suddenly more anxious than she wanted to admit. "Unless that's the whole point... Are you into pain?"

He chuckled. "No. I'm not a masochist."

"Thank goodness," she said, relieved, but not surprised. She knew without a doubt that Max wouldn't hurt her—not like the scumbag who would remain nameless—but hearing it from Max's own lips was a relief.

"I do have to say, though, I don't take orders well. I like giving them better."

"Well, who doesn't?" she said.

He shrugged and rolled the condom on with slow, but sure strokes. "Some people. Some people like being told what to do."

His tone was casual, but his eyes told a different story. The gleam in them made her fidgety, and she didn't like that. She liked it better when he made her feel breathless with anticipation.

"Well, I'm not one of them," she said, firmly, as if trying to convince herself as well as him.

And damned if he didn't get that enigmatic expression on his face, the one that made her want to crack his head open so maybe she could see what he was thinking. She felt annoyed and told herself it was because she'd lost her fuck-

me-right-now edge. She had half a mind to say *Thanks for the shibari thingy, but I'm going to hit the sack now.*

Unfortunately, that would deprive her of the other orgasms she knew were coming her way, and what sane woman passed up orgasms because she was impatient?

Luckily, he saved himself from a home lobotomy when he bent his head and kissed her again. Okay. The velvety thrust of his tongue in her mouth made her think maybe building up again could be nice. When his hard chest pressed against hers, her swollen breasts heated at the contact. His kiss slowly took possession of her mind and body, shutting down her awareness of everything but him and what he was doing to her. She ran her hands over the muscles of his back and his rock hard ass. She wanted to feel those glutes flex as he fucked her, but when he rolled over onto his back, pulling her with him, she saw he had a different position in mind.

She realized now the view of his handiwork was better if she was on top. Feeling some of the power had shifted back to her, she braced her hands on his chest and sat up. His lips were wet from their kissing. His eyes were half-closed, but smoldering with hunger.

"Fuck me," he said and the power he put into those two words almost made her come.

Sadie shivered. He wasn't asking. Hungry and aching with need, her pussy recognized this, but Sadie still resisted. Having been raised by an authoritarian military man, she had a natural urge to defy the order, even if it was something she wanted to do anyway. And yet, Max's gaze was so utterly compelling. His deeply masculine voice triggered something

inside her, a yearning to please him that overpowered the desire to resist. He so often deferred his own wishes to please her.

Not only that, but when he grabbed the knot between her breasts, the ropes suddenly seemed to be more than macabre decoration or a fun foray into the world of kink.

Sadie wasn't sure she liked that.

Still, she beat back that nervousness. She didn't have time to examine or even deal with it. With his gaze locked to hers, he took his cock in hand, angled it so the head nudged against her entrance, and shifted his hips. That slight penetration was enough and Sadie gave up trying to fight her feelings. Resistance in this case was as stupid as it was futile. As she sank down on him, taking him inside her, she moaned at the pleasure. Sex with Max was worth suffering a few butterflies in the stomach.

Satisfaction smoldered in his eyes. "That's it. That's the way."

His hand still gripping the knot, he subtly guided her movements as she rode him. He set an agonizingly slow pace, drawing out the pleasure of each long stroke. His nostrils flared as he took deep breaths, his gaze now flicking back and forth between her eyes and the silken ropes he'd wrapped her in.

"You look so beautiful, Sadie," he said. He let go of the knot and splayed his hands over her ribcage. "Really, really beautiful." He rubbed his thumbs against the rope like he couldn't believe it was real.

After that they didn't talk anymore. Words would have screwed up the mood anyway. She wanted to concentrate on his low groans, the minute changes in his expression, the provocative sensations building inside her. His thick cock glided in and out and he seemed content to keep going this way for a long time, looking at her with reverence and tracing the cords with his fingertips. But gradually, eventually, they left slow and steady behind. Their bodies craved release. Leaning down to brace herself against his chest, she kissed him. His hands gripped her by the waist and held her still. Now, he took over, thrusting upward. She clutched his shoulders tightly, desperate with the need to come.

"God, Max, yes. That's so good," she gasped. "Harder. Fuck me harder."

"You want it hard, huh?" His forehead damp with perspiration, he smiled. "You're such a bad girl," he said.

Bad girl.

Suddenly, Sadie wasn't with Max anymore. She gasped for breath, catapulted back to that motel room. To Dennis. To Dennis and his paddle. *Bad girl. Bad girl.*

A muffled shriek came out of her.

"Sadie?" Max stopped moving. He looked at her in concern.

Damn it! The ropes felt like they were constricting her, like the coils of a snake.

"Max, stop. Untie me. I—I can't breathe." She pulled at the ropes, a little panicked.

Immediately, Max reached up and slid his fingers under the rope.

"There's still plenty of slack," he said. His face was slick with perspiration, his cheeks red.

Sadie shook her head. "I don't care," she cried, still yanking on the woven cords. "I want them off. Take them off!"

Without another word, Max got out from underneath her and pulled a pair of scissors from his nightstand. They were the kind with rounded tips EMTs used to cut clothes off of accident victims. Deftly, he made a few precise cuts. Snip, snip, and she was free. The ropes fell away in pieces.

"There. They're off," he said. He threw the scissors aside and gathered her close. "You're okay," he murmured. "Everything's okay."

As his calm voice washed over her, Sadie sucked several big breaths. Max rocked her gently, making soothing sounds, and after a moment, sanity returned. Unfortunately, on its heels came complete and utter mortification. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"Max, oh, God. I'm so sorry I freaked out like that. You must think I'm a complete idiot."

His arms tightened around her, but unbelievably, he said, "As a matter of fact, I do."

"What?"

He leaned back and looked her straight in the eye. "You should have told me."

"Told you what?"

"That this wasn't the first time someone's tied you."

She glanced aside.

"It wasn't, was it?"

She shook her head.

"And judging from your reaction just now," he said, "your prior experience was not a good one."

She frowned. "So in addition to being a bug expert, inventor, and bondage guru, you're also a mind reader. Great. Either that or an armchair psychologist."

Thinking maybe the mess would distract him, she swept her hands across the bed, sending the bits of rope onto the floor. When she was done she looked up to see Max leaning against the headboard. The muscles of his jaw and neck had gone taut like bridge cables, his arms were crossed, and his Spock brow was raised as if to say he knew what she was doing and it wasn't going to fly.

It really sucked falling for a guy who was perceptive as all get out.

"I'm not a psychologist," he said finally. "But I know what I saw. One moment you were totally into it. Then all of a sudden you're hyperventilating."

In the aftermath of the hot sex and her panic attack, the last thing she wanted to do was cough up the sad, sordid story of Dennis the Prick. When she thought about where to start, her throat got thick and she wanted to go lock herself in a closet somewhere and not come out. But Max deserved an explanation. *She'd* certainly want one if some guy had blown a gasket during sex like she had. Plus, his anger was dissipating by now, and concern wrinkled his brow.

"Hey," he said, opening his arms. "Come here for a sec."

Willingly, she went to him and snuggled close. He was still sweaty, but rock solid and real. She realized she felt more secure in his arms than out of them.

"I'm not angry at you, really. I know it probably seemed like that, but I'm really more pissed off at myself. See, I know better than to break out the ropes without discussing it ahead of time with my partner. We should have set parameters. Talked about a safe word."

Sadie had no idea what he was talking about, but something inside her grabbed onto that idea of safety. "What kind of parameters? And what the heck is a safe word?"

"Oh, Sadie." He kissed her forehead. "You really don't know anything about the BDSM lifestyle, do you?"

"Consider me a late bloomer."

Max laughed.

She yanked on his chest hairs in retaliation, and he chuckled. "Well, when did *you* find out about...the lifestyle?" she asked. "Were you into this back in high school? Because, man, a BDSM Club would have been a hell of a lot more interesting than being on the debate team."

"You were on the debate team?"

"No. Are you kidding? Clubs are for conformists. I don't conform to anything. I was only trying to make a point."

"Right. I should have known better." He chuckled again. "And to answer your question, no, there wasn't a high school bondage club. I didn't even know I leaned that way yet. There were clues, sure, but I didn't understand them until later."

"What kind of clues?"

Max tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Like in a car, making out, I always felt a little disappointed when the girl undid her seatbelt, but I didn't really know why. And if I saw a movie where a woman was tied up, it really turned me on. I mean *really* turned me on. Like in 'Raiders,' where Marion's tied to the pole in that tent and Indy grabs her face and kisses her..." Max gave a gravelly chuckle. "That was a truly stellar moment in movie history."

They didn't talk for a while after that. It couldn't be coincidence Max was a master of bondage or that he'd brought up the subject of movies just now, out of the blue. As Sadie listened to Max's heart beat its deep, steady rhythm, she decided the universe had more than atonement for past misdeeds in store for her. Destiny's wheel was still turning and she could either put on her big girl panties and deal with the Dennis thing or turn tail and run.

And she hated running, figuratively and literally.

So, she took a deep breath.

"Max?" she said. "Have you ever, you know, tried to act out a scene like that from a movie?"

"Like roleplay? Oh, sure," he replied. "But not very often. I always end up cracking up."

Sadie sighed. "You're lucky."

"About being a lousy actor?"

"No, about the cracking up part."

"Ah." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You want to tell me about it?"

"No," she said. "But I'm gonna."

He hugged her tighter. "Never let it be said you chickened out of anything. What movie did you do?"

Swallowing hard, she said, "That mummy movie with Brendan Fraser."

"Oh, yeah. Rachel Weisz is bound to a stone table at the end."

"That's right. Well, Dennis, my boyfriend at the time, thought it would be fun to act out that part, except pretend the O'Connell character defeats the mummy *before* untying her, and then they have wild sex while she's helpless on the table."

"That sounds like fun, but I get the feeling it wasn't."

"Well, at first, it was great. We were in this motel room. He had me lay face down on the mattress, my feet by the pillows. He tied my wrists so the rope ran under the bed. For a while he pretended to be O'Connell, mad with lust for me, all riled up after his life or death battle with the mummy and his minions. I liked that part."

And she had. Dennis had gotten her juices flowing. His masculinity was never in question; the power and confidence he exuded had turned her on.

"But then, after the sex, he said he wasn't done. He said he was going to whip me. That's when I got nervous."

Max's body tensed and his arms tightened around her, but his voice continued to be calm. "Had you talked about whips before hand?"

"No. Not really. I mean, he was always joking around about it. You know, saying stuff like 'Don't make me get out

my whip.' But I never got the feeling he really *had* a whip, you know? Not until that night."

"And of course, the bastard didn't suggest you choose a safe word."

"No, I told you before. I don't even know what a safe word is."

He sighed. "In BDSM play, saying 'stop' and struggling can sometimes be part of the scene, so a safe word is an unmistakable signal that the bottom, the submissive, wants to stop whatever is happening."

"Oh. No, he never mentioned safe words. I just told him straight out I wanted to be untied."

"But he didn't untie you, did he?"

Sadie shook her head. She'd been so young and naive. And so terrified.

"No, he didn't. Not for a long time."

"Son of a bitch." Max took a deep breath and let it out very slowly. "Tell me now. Did he rape you? Because I swear to God, if he did, I'll track the fucker down and shove his goddamn balls down his throat."

Max's body was rigid and even though he'd spoken in a low, controlled voice, she sensed he was a vial of nitro, ready to explode. In spite of how difficult it was retelling the story of that night, she felt a certain satisfaction in Max's willingness to go to bat for her.

"No, he didn't rape me."

He made a gruff noise in his throat but remained tense. She didn't think he was aware of how tightly he was holding her.

"What *did* he do? Tell me exactly what happened."

Embarrassed by the warm tears welling in her eyes, Sadie described how Dennis began by turning on some loud music and then producing a wooden paddle and threatening her with it. She clearly remembered the whoosh as he slapped it against his hand right in front of her face. Her heart had raced when she realized the danger she was in. She'd seen cable TV shows that recounted the investigations of crimes from the police point of view. They meticulously described the clues leading them to the perp. Witnesses who knew or had encountered the criminal would shed light on his behavior, which was sometimes deceptively normal. That night she had truly believed she was going to end up on one of those shows as a corpse.

Thankfully, Dennis wasn't a murderer. But he *was* a sadistic son of a bitch.

"At first, he just talked a big game. He told me what he was going to do with the paddle. When I told him I wasn't into that, he laughed."

Sadie closed her eyes. That condescending, needling laugh had stayed with her for a long time, there in the corner of her mind to come out at night when she was alone. For months afterward, she'd been very social, wanting the security of other people to keep the memories at bay.

"He told me I'd been a bad girl and needed to be punished, and then he started paddling me. He turned up the stereo he'd brought and hit me until my ass was numb. He got out a whip, too, with fat leather straps. I begged and begged him to stop, but he wouldn't."

Sadie hated the quaver in her voice, but she kept talking.

"I've never been hit like that before. Not even by my hard-ass Navy dad. Every swat felt like fire. Sometimes he only pretended to swing the paddle just to see me flinch. That really cracked him up. But most of the time he just...hit." Sadie choked back a sob. Tears had leaked out, leaving a salty puddle on his chest.

"God, I f-feel so stupid. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm crying all over you. I didn't cry that night you know. Not until I got away. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction." Her words tumbled all over themselves.

"Shh, you have nothing to be sorry about," Max said, soothingly into her hair. "That fucker terrorized you and you have every right to get worked up. And you don't have to tell me anymore if you don't want to. It's all right."

She took a shuddering breath and got a grip on her emotions. "No," she said as firmly as she could. "I want to finish this."

Max waited quietly while Sadie tried to get the words out of a clogged throat. She realized telling someone about what had happened took away some of the power that night had over her.

"So, finally, at the end when he got tired of hitting me, he stood in front of me and—" She cringed. "—he called me names while he jerked off on my face."

Max hugged her tighter.

"And then he left me there, tied to the bed. The music still pounded, and for a couple of minutes, I didn't move a muscle. I couldn't see a thing because of..." She shook her head. "But

then I got worried he'd come back with a knife or a gun, so I yanked on the rope and found out he'd loosened it. I don't know how he did that without me noticing. Maybe it was a slip knot. I was so out of it...I don't know. At that point, I didn't care. When I saw he wasn't even in the room, I grabbed my stuff and left."

Max seethed. His anger was a white hot coal, intense, but contained. No matter how much he wanted to rage, he couldn't. Sadie needed comfort.

He grabbed some tissues from the nightstand and handed them to her. She was such a free-spirit, like the butterflies she'd prepared a home for at the museum. Who would want to hurt her, make her cry and scream and cower?

That fucking sadistic asshole prick, Dennis, that's who.

Max was familiar with that type of low-life predator. Typically, the guy would toe the line between aggression and charm, a combination that appealed to a lot of women. When he found one who was a little too free with her trust, he'd propose something harmless, like a blindfold or wrist ties. Max had to admit, the movie ploy was brilliant. Then, once she was helpless, the guy had carte blanche. But jerks like that were quickly ostracized by those within the BDSM circle. Word spread quickly; women were warned. But those like Sadie, ignorant of the subculture, were always vulnerable.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," he said as she blew her nose.

"Hey," she said, attempting an offhanded tone, not too successfully. "It's not your fault."

But it felt like it was. Like somehow he should have been there for her like a knight in goddamn fucking armor.

"It's ancient history anyway," she added with a snuffle. "Already written, over and done with. Obviously, I'm not cut out for ropes and shit. And that's fine. Because, hey, some people have a great time jumping out of airplanes for thrills, but most of us are more than happy with roller coasters, you know?"

"Roller coasters."

"Yeah. You know..." She made a swooping motion with her hand. "And, hey, you learn something new everyday. I learned that—what did you call it before? Vanilla sex. I learned that I'm a vanilla sex girl. And there's nothing wrong with that, right? Didn't we have a great time before? In my room and in the pool? You bet we did."

But Max remained silent. Sadie's speech just now sounded like she was trying to convince herself she was "normal," but he didn't believe that. He didn't think she believed it either.

Sadie was no vanilla girl; she'd loved wearing the ropes. There was no mistaking the dreamy look on her face when she ran her hands over the criss-crossing lines. She was just afraid. And he understood that. He knew from personal experience that confronting your kinky side could be daunting. Who knew what you'd find out about yourself if you dug deep enough? Ignorance was bliss, but he didn't think Sadie was a fan of ignorance and she wasn't a coward either. Sooner or later, she'd pull her head out of the sand and when she did, he intended to be there.

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Chapter Eight

The next morning after breakfast, Sadie left, saying she wouldn't be back until dinner, which suited Max, truth be told. The therapy-worthy story she'd told him had pissed him off so much he needed time to calm down. Last night, he'd wanted to grill her for every bit of information she had on Dennis. That way he could track the fucker down and give him a dose of his own medicine. Max wasn't a violent person, but if Dennis, by some miracle, showed up at the front door, he would happily pound the shit out of him or beat him with a paddle until he was groveling for mercy, humiliated and pissing himself from fear. The intensity of Max's feelings on the matter surprised him. It made him wonder. It made him think. He decided to reorganize the books in his den while he thought.

If it had been anyone else but Sadie, would he still feel such rage about what had happened to her? He didn't think so. What did that mean? Did he love her?

He certainly loved having sex with her. She'd looked so beautiful, wrapped in his ropes, expectant and eager to experience what came next. It had been the most thrilling sexual bondage he'd ever experienced. Unfortunately, in the midst of their playful banter, he'd called her a bad girl. He couldn't have known that phrase would trigger her memories of Dennis, but he felt guilty nonetheless.

He looked at the bookshelf. It looked worse than before. He frowned, thinking it symbolic of his life right now—

disorganized, jumbled. Single-handedly, Sadie had laid waste to the reliable rhythm of his routine. But he liked his routine. He loved his routine and wasn't sure he could give it up for Sadie.

By the time she got home, he hadn't resolved anything. He hadn't even finished working on the bookcase. Sadie acted as if nothing had happened. Quick as you please, she whipped up chicken marsala and some vegetable he didn't recognize but ate anyway because it was damned tasty. For dessert she did something with raspberries, chocolate, rum and ice cream that tasted like Mardi Gras in his mouth. Then, they watched something innocuous on cable and went to bed. No sex, which he was fine with. She needed time. He needed time. They snuggled close, talked for a while and eventually drifted off together.

Two weeks later they were installed in a suite thirteen stories above Waikiki. From the moment they'd left Los Angeles, Sadie had been like a little kid, exclaiming over everything, taking pictures like mad. When the hotel staff greeted her with a flower lei, she practically keeled over with glee. Max had arranged for them to arrive two days before the convention was to start, and she dragged him to all the usual tourist attractions. Not that he minded. Sadie spread fun around like confetti, making even the most boring museums interesting. But the following day, he had to get down to business, familiarizing himself with the schedule of events and what he was expected to do. Copies of his books had arrived from the Keep and Brock had magically obtained a couple cases more.

Now, he and Sadie were dressing for the first social event of the convention, a mixer at which Doms could show off their subs and the unattached could perhaps hook up. Max convinced her she needed to appear as though she "belonged" to him, or else she would be spending all her time fending off interested Doms. Also, because etiquette demanded anyone who wanted to approach her must go through him first, he'd be her buffer as she navigated the bizarre BDSM microcosm.

"Are you all right?" Max asked, for perhaps the twentieth time as he carefully cinched a knot.

"Yes," Sadie replied, holding her arms away from her sides. He was weaving a complex rope corset around her torso in lieu of regular clothing.

"You're sure? This wrap is supposed to be decorative, not restrictive, so I'm tying it looser on purpose. But on the other hand, I don't want you unraveling in the middle of the mixer."

"Feels fine, Max."

"And you're sure you want to go?" he asked, checking the tension. "You don't have to."

"Are you kidding? This is going to be a blast." She cast him a mischievous glance. "Do I have to act all subservient and call you Master?"

"Sadie, I told you. You don't have to act any way at all. Just be yourself. That's the whole point of these things, to be your real self."

When he was done a few minutes later, Sadie examined her reflection. Max had woven something truly unique. Using black satiny ropes, he'd wrapped her in a knotted design that

showed off her breasts to full advantage while covering all the bits that needed to be covered. With it she wore a vintage taffeta skirt she'd found at a seconds shop and its puffed silhouette contrasted beautifully with the slim shape she had going on top.

"You look gorgeous," Max said, resting his hands on her waist. "I'm going to be the envy of every Dom in the room."

He kissed her lingeringly and Sadie got weak in the knees. Max had not gone near her with his ropes since the night she freaked out on him. They'd had sex—incredible, passionate, satisfying sex—but without any kink. Unfortunately, this bothered her. She didn't consider herself to be a coward, and intellectually, she knew there was nothing to be afraid of. Max was the polar opposite of Dennis, calm where Dennis was volatile, confident instead of boastful, dependable, and highly intelligent. In short, there was nothing wrong with Max at all. He was a rock. It was Sadie who had the problem.

But wearing his ropes again, knowing the others would assume she belonged to him turned her on. Her panties were soaked. She was tempted to attack Max before they went to the party. But, God, that was so twisted. She didn't belong to anyone. She'd never *wanted* to belong to anyone. She was an independent woman who answered to no one but herself. She did what she pleased, when she pleased, and where she pleased.

And yet here she was, horny as hell because Max was fastening a delicate knotted choker around her neck, another symbol she was "his."

He kissed her again, softly and with an approving smile that made her pussy ache with need. Damn.

No one got on the elevator with them, so when the doors opened, she felt like the curtain had parted and she was on stage. As she walked with Max through the halls, people obviously not associated with the conference checked her out. Except for a glance down to make sure her nipples hadn't worked their way out of their confinement, she kept her eyes straight ahead in an effort to appear at ease.

Max stopped her at the door of the banquet room on the pretext of checking her conference wrist band. On the surface, he appeared calm, but after living with him for the past several weeks, she could tell something was bothering him.

"Hey, what's up?" she asked.

He looked at her moment.

"You worried I'll embarrass you in some way?" she asked.

"No." His reply was swift. "Not at all. It's just males often far outnumber females and I'm worried about you—"

"Causing a stampede?"

He smiled, but halfheartedly.

"Don't worry about me. I have the choker on so there shouldn't be a problem."

"Well, I'm still sticking to your side," he declared.

"Possessive, aren't you?"

He met her gaze squarely. "Of you? Absolutely."

A feeling of warm satisfaction washed over her. She decided she liked wearing the collar.

Once they'd joined the party, Sadie found it easy to forget all she was wearing on top were a bunch of ropes. Compared to what some of the others had on, her outfit was tame. There were capes and codpieces, spiked collars, strap harnesses, Hannibal Lechter-type hoods, and enough leather, latex, and rubber to choke a horse. Her self-consciousness evaporated like smoke in the midst of so much kink. In fact, when Brock O'Dell came to Max with a minor emergency regarding his schedule, Sadie didn't object to Max disappearing for a few minutes. She assured him she was fine people watching. Shortly after he left, she met a woman who introduced herself as Sara, also wearing a collar, but hers was red leather with rhinestones and a pretty heart charm. She was especially interested to hear it was Sadie's first convention and happily answered many of Sadie's questions, even the nosy personal ones, but a male voice interrupted their conversation.

"What a small world."

Sadie turned to see Dennis, in the flesh. She couldn't believe it. But the way things had been going she'd been stupid not to anticipate Destiny's wheel turning that last little bit. Of course, Dennis would be here. The universe loved circularity and bumping into Dennis here at the convention was another circle becoming complete.

"I always knew you had a deviant side," he said. "And here's proof."

That nasty, weasely smirk, that voice shot her right back to that motel room where he'd left her demoralized, terrified, and blinded by his disgusting semen. Her heart pounded as

she looked for Max. He was just coming back into the room. She desperately wanted to fling herself into his strong arms so he could protect her. The urge to vomit was almost as strong. But she stopped herself. She couldn't—*wouldn't* do either, damn it. She needed to confront Dennis and this was her chance. If she didn't, from this moment on, every time she needed to be courageous, she'd remember this time when she hadn't been.

Thankful for the heels that brought her eye level with him, she regarded Dennis with what she hoped was a cool expression.

"You have some nerve approaching me," she said.

He laughed. "Hey, that's the whole purpose of these mixers, isn't it?"

Dennis looked around him for nods of male support. What he got, though, were disapproving frowns. And after a moment's thought, Sadie realized why. Despite his attendance here at the convention, Dennis didn't have a clue as to proper BDSM etiquette.

Sadie deliberately fingered the knotted choker around her neck. "But it's obvious, I'm with someone," she said.

"Really?" He scoffed, eyeing Sara doubtfully.

With impeccable timing, Max ambled over. Sadie noted with great satisfaction that worry flashed across Dennis's face as he gave Max a once-over. Her man was looking mighty fine in black slacks and a black shirt open at the neck. He stood a couple inches taller than Dennis and as usual, he oozed confidence.

"Anyone with eyes can see she's with someone," he said, touching her choker with his index finger.

Dennis frowned, realizing now the choker had significance.

"Max, honey, there's someone I'd like you to meet. This," she said, "is Dennis."

"Dennis." The slightly amused smile on Max's lips hardened into a straight, very pissed off line. His Spock brow arched so high it almost went off his forehead.

"Yes, Dennis," she said.

Sadie tensed, wondering what Max would do. Part of her hoped he'd gather a bunch of his buddies, hustle Dennis into some alley and pound the shit out of him. But she knew Max better than that. He did not fly off the handle. He thought things through. She could visualize the circuitry of his mind alight with activity as he analyzed his options. Eventually, he spoke.

"Dennis," he said, "Sadie's told me you introduced her to BDSM."

"Yeah, I guess I did," Dennis replied warily.

"And now, here you are at the con, all decked out. Looking for a sub?" Max asked.

"Yeah." Dennis glanced around again. "Just like a lot of people."

Max shrugged. "Well, I've got to give you credit. It's certainly easier finding subs someplace like this than it is forcing them into submission."

"Forcing?" Dennis shot a glance at Sadie, who glared back at him. He ignored her and turned back to Max. "That's ridiculous. She agreed to being tied up."

"But that's all I agreed to, you bastard," she exclaimed, unable to keep silent any longer, especially when Dennis was talking about her like she wasn't there. "You never told me you wanted to paddle me, call me names all night, and then come on my face. None of that stuff was on the table when I said yes."

Max laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and chuckled. "Easy there. Let's not cause a scene."

But it was too late. People nearby had noticed the ruckus.

Sadie took one step toward Dennis. "And furthermore, I told you to stop when you started in with the paddle."

Dennis gave a half-hearted shrug. "Come on. 'Stop...' 'Don't...'" he said in a falsetto. "Everyone knows resisting just makes it more fun."

"Only if it's fake resisting, asshole. You know, you might think you're a Dom, like Max here, or any of these other people, but you know what?" She flicked her eyes over his sad idea of a kick-ass outfit—shiny latex leggings, a leather vest, and some ridiculous gauntlets with studs on the knuckles. "You're clearly not, and you never will be, because you don't understand what it's all about."

Dennis scoffed. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You have to be given the power before it's meaningful," Max said.

Max's earnest tone made something inside Sadie shiver into awareness, and when she met his gaze, that something took root. She realized it had always been there, but been dormant, like a daffodil bulb. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to analyze it.

Dennis laughed, looking at Max with an expression of incredulity. "Give me a fucking break. What are you? The Yoda of BDSM?" He glanced around and lowered his voice, finally noticing the attention. "I don't give a fuck about meaning. I'm not looking for true love here."

Sadie was about to spit a retort at him, but Sara beat her to it.

"Well, whatever it is you're looking for, you're not going to find it here..." Sara looked at his convention badge. "...Dennis Abernathy from Culver City, California. Anyone who ambushes a sub while they're helpless and disregards their wishes completely is *persona non grata* in the lifestyle, so why don't you take a hike?"

"Hey, why don't *you* take a hike," Dennis said contemptuously. "Sara whoever you are..." He looked at her name tag, and when he faltered, Sadie looked too.

Sara Delmonico, KinkCon Vendor Coordinator.

"Anyone have scissors on them?" Sara asked.

"I do," Max said, handing her his pair. Even though Sadie's corset wasn't particularly restrictive, he'd insisted on carrying them anyway.

Sara deftly snipped off Dennis's wristband and convention badge holder then waved at one of the security people.

"Please escort this man out."

"Hey, wait a second! I have a perfect right to be here. I paid a lot of money—"

"Which you'll be refunded. Of course, you can continue to stay here at the hotel, but as of this moment, you're banned from the conference."

"This is ridiculous," Dennis exclaimed as he turned on his heel to leave with the security person. "You're only the vendor coordinator. I want to talk to the person in charge."

Sara gave Sadie and Max a smile as she pulled out her cell phone then followed Dennis. "That's fine. I'll call Brock right now and he can meet us at the registration desk."

Back in their suite, Sadie watched Max putter around the room. Even though he was away from home, he had a little evening ritual which she observed with amusement. He neatened his toiletries, making sure his toothbrush and toothpaste were parallel, then tended to the towels until they were hanging with military precision. He nudged any shoes that had gotten out of line in the closet and finally checked the lock on the door.

"What a night," Max said, unbuckling his belt.

Sadie sat on the bed. "You said it."

After Dennis left with his unwanted entourage, Sadie had become the center of attention. Anything but shy, others came right out and asked about what he'd done to her. Surprisingly, she had no problem sharing the most awful night of her life with this group of strangers. She attributed it to the air of acceptance permeating the room. People she'd never met before gathered around her in a protective circle, as if she were a young member of the herd. She'd also felt, as much as she really hated the word, empowered. Facing down Dennis had been nerve-wracking, but with Max beside her, an unfailing pillar of support, she'd done it. Sure, she might have stood up to him if she'd been alone, but there was

a great deal to be said for having a man like Max at your back.

"You okay?" he asked. "You're so quiet."

"A miracle, huh?" She smiled at him. He smiled back. "I'm fine," she said. "I'm just, you know, thinking."

"I'm probably going to hate myself in the morning, but I have to ask. What about?"

Sighing, she fell back onto the bed and threw her arms over her head. "About you...and me, I guess."

He pulled his belt loose, coiled it neatly and tucked it into his suitcase. "Deep thoughts, obviously."

"Have *you* thought about us, Max? Where we're going?"

He lay down next to her, his head propped with his hand. "Of course I have. But I've been keeping my thoughts to myself. I don't want to rush you."

"Rush me into what?" She turned on her side and propped her head up too.

He went silent for a moment, and surprisingly, she waited.

"More," he said simply. "Everything."

"Everything? Like marriage, kids, a picket fence and a dog everything?"

His smile was reserved. "Whatever you'll agree to. It'll always be whatever you and I agree to."

She studied his face as she absorbed the enormity of what he'd just said.

"I'm not nearly ready for 'everything,'" she said.

"To tell the truth, neither am I."

What a relief.

"But I could be," he added. "Eventually."

"Oh."

He curled a hand around her neck and kissed her. His lips were warm and wonderfully familiar.

"Maybe," he said, "we could just start with you moving in with me."

"For a guy with so many college degrees, you don't have a very good memory. I already moved in with you."

He gave her a look.

"Oh, you mean like actually unpack my bag."

"Yes."

"Evacuate the guest room."

"Yes."

"Inhabit the 'Inner Sanctum.'" She made air quotation marks.

"All that and more. I want your mail to come to the house," he said. "I want there to be a 'your side of the bed.' And when I'm straightening my sock drawer, I want to see some girly socks in there, too."

Oh, God. She closed her eyes, unable to handle the emotion she saw in his. "You say the most romantic things."

He chuckled and she opened her eyes again.

"I mean it. That is really the most romantic thing anyone's ever said to me."

"So, will you?"

She thought about her socks in his drawer. She could deal with that. Male and female socks could co-exist.

She thought about Max's compulsive lifestyle and decided she could even deal with that. It might mean she'd have to break her habit of dropping clothes on the floor when she got

undressed, but she'd been neat when she'd lived at home under the critical eye of her dad, and given time she could be that way again.

And then she thought about the thing Max carefully *hadn't* mentioned.

He liked to tie women up. If she became his one and only woman, it stood to reason that at one point sooner or later, he'd want to restrain her. Like Dennis had. But *not* like Dennis had.

Could she submit to Max in bed without reservation?

"You're thinking about the bondage aspect, aren't you?"

She glanced at him. "It's really impressive that you can do the Vulcan mind meld without even touching my head."

He palmed her cheek, a small smile on his lips. "I won't tell you there's nothing to be afraid of, because that would be a lie. It's always scary to try something new, especially if the last time you tried it, it went to shit. But I will tell you that I'll do everything in my power to alleviate the fear. If you submit to me, you'll be the one in control. Everything we would do would be planned. No surprises. We'd go slow and only do what you wanted to do."

"Like no calling me 'bad girl.'"

"Fuck, no." He spoke quietly, but with a certainty that reinforced what she already knew.

She belonged with Max.

She even kind of loved the guy.

Shit. That wasn't right. She *definitely* loved the guy.

Sure, he was weird. He kept a spider zoo inside his house. Even if he didn't wash his hands a hundred times a day, he

definitely had OCD. And then there was the fact that he still wore a retractable key chain. But that didn't matter. She accepted all of that about him, even cherished it, and he accepted her too.

Because Lord knew she had faults. She had the attention span of a gnat. She talked way too much, blurted out shit without thinking. Hell, she did a lot of stuff without thinking. But steadfast, patient, and thoughtful Max was the perfect complement to that. He'd be able to rein her in when she was in a let's-install-a-waterfall-fountain-in-the-dining-room! mood, and in return, she could inject a little spontaneity into his regulated routine.

And when they got back home, she decided she *would* let him tie her up, because it sucked to want and fear something at the same time. With Max helping her, she knew she could climb that mountain, or cross that ocean, or whatever the hell cliché was appropriate for her situation. Max understood her. He understood her better than she understood herself. He'd help her navigate the shoals (here came the clichéd metaphors again) so she didn't run aground. He'd keep her safe. And she liked that idea.

"So, is the sock merger on or off?" he asked, his legendary patience having expired.

Meeting Max's eyes, her own welling with tears, she nodded. "It's on."

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Chapter Nine

One week later

Max gazed at Sadie with reverence. He'd seen many sublime sights in his life. Hundreds of praying mantises hatching from an egg case. His nephew a couple of hours after he was born. Any number of photographs taken from space where he could recognize geographical landmarks. But nothing compared to seeing Sadie wrapped in his web of rope, fastened to his bed, begging for his touch. She'd been wearing the corset since noon in preparation for tonight, when she surrendered herself to him completely like he'd fantasized so often.

He'd decided to play it safe this first time. Dennis had lashed her face down, legs and arms spread like a giant X, a position allowing no movement at all. Dennis had wanted complete control over his victim.

Max, on the other hand, knew at this early stage, all Sadie needed was the suggestion that she couldn't get away, and so far, so good. She'd broken out in a sweat when he'd tied her wrists together and her body shook when he lashed the length around what amounted to a decorative boat cleat bolted to the head board. But she'd managed her fear by breathing deeply like he'd told her.

That had been forty-five minutes ago. Since then, he'd done his best to arouse her as slowly as possible. With her sighs and shivers to spur him on, he'd licked every naked inch of skin he could reach. Spent a lot of time tickling her neck

with his lips and tongue, moved to her ears, her jaw, her shoulders. And her clit...her swollen clit had taken lash after lash of his tongue. He'd pleased her pussy with his hand, thrusting slowly, flexing his fingers inside. He brought all his focus to bear on her body, bringing her within sight of climax, but not close enough to be dangerous. Through it all, he checked on her, scissors at the ready on the nightstand. At the slightest hint of anxiety, he was prepared to stop everything. No way was he risking an emotional breakdown again.

Reaching up now, he checked her wrists. The knots were holding. There was still plenty of play.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm almost perfect," she answered. She was panting, her cheeks flushed.

"Almost...?"

Narrowing her eyes, she spat, "Perfect would be no more teasing, you sadistic bastard. Perfect would be you inside me before my sexual capacitor shorts out."

Having paged through one of his *Scientific International* journals on the flight back from Hawaii, Sadie had decided she wanted to increase her knowledge in that subject, and ever since then she'd been peppering her speech with pseudo-scientific terms. She called it Geek Speak.

"Your sexual capacitor." He shook his head. "There's no such thing."

"Oh, yeah, Poindexter? For your information, you've been fiddling with my sexual capacitor for the last freakin' hour and

if you don't get your cock inside it pretty damn soon, I won't be accountable for my actions!"

"Poor thing," he said, clucking his tongue. "She's so confused." He wrapped his hand around his shaft and stroked it. "This is not a cock."

"The hell it isn't."

"It's a thermal friction rod."

She jerked on the ropes and snarled. "Whatever the hell it is, buster, use it or lose it!"

Max bit back his laughter. In her current mood, laughter would only land him an extended stay in the doghouse. And that wouldn't be nearly as fun as thrusting his thermal friction rod into her sexual capacitor.

Lowering his head, he kissed her, and as she petulantly sealed her lips together, he smiled to himself.

What had he done to deserve this perfect woman? It had only been a month since Sadie had hijacked his life, but he couldn't imagine living without her. He'd already developed a love-hate relationship with her lingerie drawer. He goddamn loved the silky bits of satin and lace she pulled out of there and used to drive him mad with lust. But at the same time, the sight of her disorganized jumble made him fidgety. By now he'd trained himself to just not open the drawer. But that was half the fun. She challenged him. If he could wake up to a new Sadie challenge everyday for the rest of his life, he'd die a happy man.

Reaching between them, he guided his cock between her legs and christened it with her wetness. As he slid inside, slid deep inside, he cupped her face and caught her gaze.

"It's good, isn't it," he said, withdrawing and then pushing in again.

All playfulness gone now, she nodded. "Better than good, Max. Good to the millionth power."

"You know why that is, don't you?"

She shrugged as best she could with her arms stretched above her head. "Because we're sexually compatible?"

He kissed her tenderly. "Well, yes, there is that."

"Thank God."

"But there's also this funny little thing called love."

"Oh, yeah." She smiled and his heart tha-thumped hard in his chest. "I think I've heard of it."

"Think you might want some?" he asked.

"From you?"

"No, from the Dalai Lama. Of course from me."

"Only if you want some from me in return. I happen to have a whole lot of love inside me with your name on it. Until very recently, I didn't really know who it was for, but I know now."

Because his throat suddenly felt thick, he closed his eyes and kissed her again.

There was this sci-fi movie he'd seen once where a man and woman were stranded on a space station with light years of outer space between them and any other intelligent life. That's how Max felt now. His whole world had narrowed to Sadie and the pure human joy he got from being with her, inside her.

"I love you," he whispered against her lips.

"I love you, too, Max. I love you, too."

Then her eyes fluttered shut, and his body demanded that he finish this. Both of them had been on the verge of coming for too long now and her shoulders were going to ache when he cut her loose.

Taking her mouth again, he began to pump in earnest. Sadie made mewling noises in her throat, meeting him thrust for thrust. He'd joked before about the friction, but he wasn't laughing now. He wasn't doing anything but trying to keep up the pace and hold back his orgasm until she found hers because damned if he was going to ruin a near perfect love declaration with a failure to satisfy his woman.

"God, Max, I'm almost there," she gasped.

"Do it, Sadie. Come for me."

He redoubled his efforts. Sweat trickled down his temples and gathered in the small of his back. Over and over he slammed into her as her face twisted and she clenched her fists, straining...straining...

Her body stiffened and a cry flew from her lips. A moment later, Max lost it, too. The flood came at last, and it was goddamn fucking fantastic, more fantastic than anything he'd ever felt before. He felt huge and proud and triumphant, like he'd won a battle or saved a life or something much more meaningful than making Sadie come. Then again, he thought as he gazed down at her face, love for him radiating from her eyes, it didn't get any more meaningful than this.

The End

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Fit To Be Tied
by Kate Willoughby

About the Author:

Kate Willoughby lives in Southern California with her husband and two teenaged sons. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading, cooking, and scrapbooking. She also loves hearing from fans. Find her at katewilloughby.blogspot.com or on Facebook.
